The Duke of Chimney Butte

George Washington Ogden

W. C. Strudgeon

STRUDGEON'S GROCERY
2486 PRESCOTT el. GA. 1680
ACROSS FROM HIGH SCHOOL

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"There's no use to run away from me," he said
[*Page 166*]

THE DUKE OF CHIMNEY BUTTE

BY

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AUTHOR OF
THE LAND OF LAST CHANCE

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The Duke of Chimney Butte

CHAPTER I

THE ALL-IN-ONE

DOWN through the Bad Lands the Little Missouri comes in long windings, white, from a distance, as a frozen river between the ash-gray hills. At its margin there are willows; on the small forelands, which flood in June when the mountain waters are released, cottonwoods grow, leaning toward the southwest like captives straining in their bonds, yearning in their way for the sun and winds of kinder latitudes.

Rain comes to that land but seldom in the summer days; in winter the wind sweeps the snow into rocky cañons; buttes, with tops leveled by the drift of the old, earth-making days, break the weary repetition of hill beyond hill.

But to people who dwell in a land a long time and go about the business of getting a living out

of what it has to offer, its wonders are no longer notable, its hardships no longer peculiar. So it was with the people who lived in the Bad Lands at the time that we come among them on the vehicle of this tale. To them it was only an ordinary country of toil and disappointment, or of opportunity and profit, according to their station and success.

To Jeremiah Lambert it seemed the land of hopelessness, the last boundary of utter defeat as he labored over the uneven road at the end of a blistering summer day, trundling his bicycle at his side. There was a suit-case strapped to the handlebar of the bicycle, and in that receptacle were the wares which this guileless peddler had come into that land to sell. He had set out from Omaha full of enthusiasm and youthful vigor, incited to the utmost degree of vending fervor by the representations of the general agent for the little instrument which had been the stepping-stone to greater things for many an ambitious young man.

According to the agent, Lambert reflected, as he pushed his punctured, lop-wheeled, disordered, and dejected bicycle along; there had

been none of the ambitious business climbers at hand to add his testimony to the general agent's word.

Anyway, he had taken the agency, and the agent had taken his essential twenty-two dollars and turned over to him one hundred of those notable ladders to future greatness and affluence. Lambert had them there in his imitation-leather suit-case — from which the rain had taken the last deceptive gloss — minus seven which he had sold in the course of fifteen days.

In those fifteen days Lambert had traveled five hundred miles, by the power of his own sturdy legs, by the grace of his bicycle, which had held up until this day without protest over the long, sandy, rocky, dismal roads, and he had lived on less than a gopher, day taken by day.

Housekeepers were not pining for the combination potato-parer, apple-corer, can-opener, tack-puller, known as the "All-in-One" in any reasonable proportion.

It did not go. Indisputably it was a good thing, and well built, and finished like two dollars' worth of cutlery. The selling price, retail,

was one dollar, and it looked to an unsophisticated young graduate of an agricultural college to be a better opening toward independence and the foundation of a farm than a job in the hay fields. A man must make his start somewhere, and the farther away from competition the better his chance.

This country to which the general agent had sent him was becoming more and more sparsely settled. The chances were stretching out against him with every mile. The farther into that country he should go the smaller would become the need for that marvelous labor-saving invention.

Lambert had passed the last house before noon, when his sixty-five-pound bicycle had suffered a punctured tire, and there had bargained with a Scotch woman at the greasy kitchen door with the smell of curing sheepskins in it for his dinner. It took a good while to convince the woman that the All-in-One was worth it, but she yielded out of pity for his hungry state. From that house he estimated that he had made fifteen miles before the tire gave out; since then he had added ten or twelve more to the score.

Nothing that looked like a house was in sight, and it was coming on dusk.

He labored on, bent in spirit, sore of foot. From the rise of a hill, when it had fallen so dark that he was in doubt of the road, he heard a voice singing. And this was the manner of the song:

Oh, I bet my money on a bob-tailed hoss,
An' a hoo-dah, an' a hoo-dah;
I bet my money on a bob-tailed hoss,
An' a hoo-dah bet on the bay.

The singer was a man, his voice an aggravated tenor with a shake to it like an accordion, and he sang that stanza over and over as Lambert leaned on his bicycle and listened.

Lambert went down the hill. Presently the shape of trees began to form out of the valley. Behind that barrier the man was doing his singing, his voice now rising clear, now falling to distance as if he passed to and from, in and out of a door, or behind some object which broke the flow of sound. A whiff of coffee, presently, and the noise of the man breaking dry sticks,

as with his foot, jarring his voice to a deeper tremolo. Now the light, with the legs of the man in it, showing a cow-camp, the chuck wagon in the foreground, the hope of hospitality big in its magnified proportions.

Beyond the fire where the singing cook worked, men were unsaddling their horses and turning them into the corral. Lambert trundled his bicycle into the firelight, hailing the cook with a cheerful word.

The cook had a tin plate in his hands, which he was wiping on a flour sack. At sight of this singular combination of man and wheels he leaned forward in astonishment, his song bitten off between two words, the tin plate before his chest, the drying operations suspended. Amazement was on him, if not fright. Lambert put his hand into his hip-pocket and drew forth a shining All-in-One, which he always had ready there to produce as he approached a door.

He stood there with it in his hand, the firelight over him, smiling in his most ingratiating fashion. That had been one of the strong texts of the general agent. Always meet them with a smile, he said, and leave them with a smile,

no matter whether they deserved it or not. It proved a man's unfaltering confidence in himself and the article which he presented to the world.

Lambert was beginning to doubt even this paragraph of his general instructions. He had been smiling until he believed his eye-teeth were wearing thin from exposure, but it seemed the one thing that had a grain in it among all the buncombe and bluff. And he stood there smiling at the camp cook, who seemed to be afraid of him, the tin plate held before his gizzard like a shield.

There was nothing about Lambert's appearance to scare anybody, and least of all a bow-legged man beside a fire in the open air of the Bad Lands, where things are not just as they are in any other part of this world at all. His manner was rather boyish and diffident, and wholly apologetic, and the All-in-One glistened in his hand like a razor, or a revolver, or anything terrible and destructive that a startled camp cook might make it out to be.

A rather long-legged young man, in canvas puttees, a buoyant and irrepressible light in his

face which the fatigues and disappointments of the long road had not dimmed; a light-haired man, with his hat pushed back from his forehead, and a speckled shirt on him, and trousers rather tight — that was what the camp cook saw, standing exactly as he had turned and posed at Lambert's first word.

Lambert drew a step nearer, and began negotiations for supper on the basis of an even exchange.

"Oh, agent, are you?" said the cook, letting out a breath of relief.

"No; peddler."

"I don't know how to tell 'em apart. Well, put it away, son, put it away, whatever it is. No hungry man don't have to dig up his money to eat in this camp."

This was the kindest reception that Lambert had received since taking to the road to found his fortunes on the All-in-One. He was quick with his expression of appreciation, which the cook ignored while he went about the business of lighting two lanterns which he hung on the wagon end.

Men came stringing into the light from the

noise of unsaddling at the corral with loud and jocund greetings to the cook, and respectful, even distant and reserved, " evenin's " for the stranger. All of them but the cook wore cartridge-belts and revolvers, which they unstrapped and hung about the wagon as they arrived. All of them, that is, but one black-haired, tall young man. He kept his weapon on, and sat down to eat with it close under his hand.

Nine or ten of them sat in at the meal, with a considerable clashing of cutlery on tin plates and cups. It was evident to Lambert that his presence exercised a restraint over their customary exchange of banter. In spite of the liberality of the cook, and the solicitation on part of his numerous hosts to " eat hearty," Lambert could not help the feeling that he was away off on the edge, and that his arrival had put a rein on the spirits of these men.

Mainly they were young men like himself, two or three of them only betrayed by gray in beards and hair; brown, sinewy, lean-jawed men, no dissipation showing in their eyes.

Lambert felt himself drawn to them by a

sense of kinship. He never had been in a cow-camp before in his life, but there was something in the air of it, in the dignified ignoring of the evident hardships of such a life that told him he was among his kind.

The cook was a different type of man from the others, and seemed to have been pitched into the game like the last pawn of a desperate player. He was a short man, thick in the body, heavy in the shoulders, so bow-legged that he weaved from side to side like a sailor as he went swinging about his work. It seemed, indeed, that he must have taken to a horse very early in life, while his legs were yet plastic, for they had set to the curve of the animal's barrel like the bark on a tree.

His black hair was cut short, all except a forelock like a horse, leaving his big ears naked and unframed. These turned away from his head as if they had been frosted and wilted, and if ears ever stood as an index to generosity in this world the camp cook's at once pronounced him the most liberal man to be met between the mountains and the sea. His features were small, his mustache and eyebrows large, his

nose sharp and thin, his eyes blue, and as bright and merry as a June day.

He wore a blue wool shirt, new and clean, with a bright scarlet necktie as big as a hand of tobacco; and a green velvet vest, a galloping horse on his heavy gold watch-chain, and great, loose, baggy corduroy trousers, like a pirate of the Spanish Main. These were folded into expensive, high-heeled, quilted-topped boots, and, in spite of his trade, there was not a spot of grease or flour on him anywhere to be seen.

Lambert noted the humorous glances which passed from eye to eye, and the sly winks that went round the circle of cross-legged men with tin plates between their knees as they looked now and then at his bicycle leaning close by against a tree. But the exactions of hospitality appeared to keep down both curiosity and comment during the meal. Nobody asked him where he came from, what his business was, or whither he was bound, until the last plate was pitched into the box, the last cup drained of its black, scalding coffee.

It was one of the elders who took it up then, after he had his pipe going and Lambert had

rolled a cigarette from the proffered pouch.

"What kind of a horse is that you're ridin', son?" he inquired.

"Have a look at it," Lambert invited, knowing that the machine was new to most, if not all, of them. He led the way to the bicycle, they unlimbering from their squatting beside the wagon and following.

He took the case containing his unprofitable wares from the handlebars and turned the bicycle over to them, offering no explanations on its peculiarities or parts, speaking only when they asked him, in horse parlance, with humor that broadened as they put off their reserve. On invitation to show its gait he mounted it, after explaining that it had stepped on a nail and traveled lamely. He circled the fire and came back to them, offering it to anybody who might want to try his skill.

Hard as they were to shake out of the saddle, not a man of them, old or young, could mount the rubber-shod steed of the city streets. All of them gave it up after a tumultuous hour of hilarity but the bow-legged cook, whom they called Taterleg. He said he never had laid

much claim to being a horseman, but if he couldn't ride a long-horned Texas steer that went on wheels he'd resign his job.

He took it out into the open, away from the immediate danger of a collision with a tree, and squared himself to break it in. He got it going at last, cheered by loud whoops of admiration and encouragement, and rode it straight into the fire. He scattered sticks and coals and bore a wabbling course ahead, his friends after him, shouting and waving hats. Somewhere in the dark beyond the lanterns he ran into a tree.

But he came back pushing the machine, his nose skinned, sweating and triumphant, offering to pay for any damage he had done. Lambert assured him there was no damage. They sat down to smoke again, all of them feeling better, the barrier against the stranger quite down, everything comfortable and serene.

Lambert told them, in reply to kindly, polite questioning from the elder of the bunch, a man designated by the name Siwash, how he was lately graduated from the Kansas Agricultural College at Manhattan, and how he had taken the road with a grip full of hardware to get enough

ballast in his jeans to keep the winter wind from blowing him away.

"Yes, I thought that was a college hat you had on," said Siwash.

Lambert acknowledged its weakness.

"And that shirt looked to me from the first snort I got at it like a college shirt. I used to be where they was at one time."

Lambert explained that an aggie wasn't the same as a regular college fellow, such as they turn loose from the big factories in the East, where they thicken their tongues to the broad *a* and call it an education; nothing like that, at all. He went into the details of the great farms manned by the students, the bone-making, as well as the brain-making work of such an institution as the one whose shadows he had lately left.

"I ain't a-findin' any fault with them farmer colleges," Siwash said. "I worked for a man in Montanny that sent his boy off to one of 'em, and that feller come back and got to be state vet'nary. I ain't got nothing ag'in' a college hat, as far as that goes, neither, but I know 'em when I see 'em — I can spot 'em every

time. Will you let us see them Do-it-Alls? ''

Lambert produced one of the little implements, explained its points, and it passed from hand to hand, with comments which would have been worth gold to the general agent.

'' It's a toothpick and a tater-peeler put together,'' said Siwash, when it came back to his hand. The young fellow with the black, sleek hair, who kept his gun on, reached for it, bent over it in the light, examining it with interest.

'' You can trim your toenails with it and half-sole your boots,'' he said. '' You can shave with it and saw wood, pull teeth and brand mavericks; you can open a bottle or a bank with it, and you can open the hired gal's eyes with it in the mornin'. It's good for the old and the young, for the crippled and the *in*-sane; it'll heat your house and hoe your garden, and put the children to bed at night. And it's made and sold and distributed by Mr. — Mr. — by the Duke ——''

Here he bent over it a little closer, turning it in the light to see what was stamped in the metal beneath the words '' The Duke,'' that being the name denoting excellence which the

manufacturer had given the tool.

"By the Duke of — the Duke of — is them three links of saursage, Siwash?"

Siwash looked at the triangle under the name.

"No, that's Indian writin'; it means a mountain," he said.

"Sure, of course, I might 'a' knowed," the young man said with deep self-scorn. "That's a butte, that's old Chimney Butte, as plain as smoke. Made and sold and distributed in the Bad Lands by the Duke of Chimney Butte. Duke," said he solemnly, rising and offering his hand, "I'm proud to know you."

There was no laughter at this; it was not time to laugh yet. They sat looking at the young man, primed and ready for the big laugh, indeed, but holding it in for its moment. As gravely as the cowboy had risen, as solemnly as he held his countenance in mock seriousness, Lambert rose and shook hands with him.

"The pleasure is mostly mine," said he, not a flush of embarrassment or resentment in his face, not a quiver of the eyelid as he looked the other in the face, as if this were some high and mighty occasion, in truth.

"And you're all right, Duke, you're sure all right," the cowboy said, a note of admiration in his voice.

" I'd bet you money he's all right," Siwash said, and the others echoed it in nods and grins.

The cowboy sat down and rolled a cigarette, passed his tobacco across to Lambert, and they smoked. And no matter if his college hat had been only half as big as it was, or his shirt ring-streaked and spotted, they would have known the stranger for one of their kind, and accepted him as such.

CHAPTER II

WHETSTONE, THE OUTLAW

WHEN Taterleg roused the camp before the east was light, Lambert noted that another man had ridden in. This was a wiry young fellow with a short nose and fiery face, against which his scant eyebrows and lashes were as white as chalk.

His presence in the camp seemed to put a restraint on the spirits of the others, some of whom greeted him by the name Jim, others ignoring him entirely. Among these latter was the black-haired man who had given Lambert his title and elevated him to the nobility of the Bad Lands. On the face of it there was a crow to be picked between them.

Jim was belted with a pistol and heeled with a pair of those long-roweled Mexican spurs, such as had gone out of fashion on the western range long before his day. He leaned on his elbow near the fire, his legs stretched out in a

way that obliged Taterleg to walk round the spurred boots as he went between his cooking and the supplies in the wagon, the tailboard of which was his kitchen table.

If Taterleg resented this lordly obstruction, he did not discover it by word or feature. He went on humming a tune without words as he worked, handing out biscuits and ham to the hungry crew. Jim had eaten his breakfast already, and was smoking a cigarette at his ease. Now and then he addressed somebody in obscene jocularity.

Lambert saw that Jim turned his eyes on him now and then with sneering contempt, but said nothing. When the men had made a hasty end of their breakfast three of them started to the corral. The young man who had humorously enumerated the virtues of the All-in-One, whom the others called Spence, was of this number. He turned back, offering Lambert his hand with a smile.

"I'm glad I met you, Duke, and I hope you'll do well wherever you travel," he said, with such evident sincerity and good feeling that Lambert felt like he was parting from a friend.

"Thanks, old feller, and the same to you."

Spence went on to saddle his horse, whistling as he scuffed through the low sage. Jim sat up.

"I'll make you whistle through your ribs," he snarled after him.

It was Sunday. These men who remained in camp were enjoying the infrequent luxury of a day off. With the first gleam of morning they got out their razors and shaved, and Siwash, who seemed to be the handy man and chief counselor of the outfit, cut everybody's hair, with the exception of Jim, who had just returned from somewhere on the train, and still had the scent of the barber-shop on him, and Taterleg, who had mastered the art of shingling himself, and kept his hand in by constant practice.

Lambert mended his tire, using an old rubber boot that Taterleg found kicking around camp to plug the big holes in his outer tube. He was for going on then, but Siwash and the others pressed him to stay over the day, to which invitation he yielded without great argument.

There was nothing ahead of him but desola-

tion, said Taterleg, a country so rough that it tried a horse to travel it. Ranchhouses were farther apart as a man proceeded, and beyond that, mountains. It looked to Taterleg as if he'd better give it up.

That was so, according to the opinion of Siwash. To his undoubted knowledge, covering the history of twenty-four years, no agent ever had penetrated that far before. Having broken this record on a bicycle, Lambert ought to be satisfied. If he was bound to travel, said Siwash, his advice would be to travel back.

It seemed to Lambert that the bottom was all out of his plans, indeed. It would be far better to chuck the whole scheme overboard and go to work as a cowboy if they would give him a job. That was nearer the sphere of his intended future activities; that was getting down to the root and foundation of a business which had a ladder in it whose rungs were not made of any general agent's hot air.

After his hot and heady way of quick decisions and planning to completion before he even had begun, Lambert was galloping the Bad Lands as superintendent of somebody's ranch,

having made the leap over all the trifling years, with their trifling details of hardship, low wages, loneliness, and isolation in a wink. From superintendent he galloped swiftly on his fancy to a white ranchhouse by some calm riverside, his herds around him, his big hat on his head, market quotations coming to him by telegraph every day, packers appealing to him to ship five trainloads at once to save their government contracts.

What is the good of an imagination if a man cannot ride it, and feel the wind in his face as he flies over the world? Even though it is a liar and a trickster, and a rifler of time which a drudge of success would be stamping into gold, it is better for a man than wine. He can return from his wide excursions with no deeper injury than a sigh.

Lambert came back to the reality, broaching the subject of a job. Here Jim took notice and cut into the conversation, it being his first word to the stranger.

"Sure you can git a job, bud," he said, coming over to where Lambert sat with Siwash and Taterleg, the latter peeling potatoes for a stew,

somebody having killed a calf. "The old man needs a couple of hands; he told me to keep my eye open for anybody that wanted a job."

"I'm glad to hear of it," said Lambert, warming up at the news, feeling that he must have been a bit severe in his judgment of Jim, which had not been altogether favorable.

"He'll be over in the morning; you'd better hang around."

Seeing the foundation of a new fortune taking shape, Lambert said he would "hang around." They all applauded his resolution, for they all appeared to like him in spite of his appearance, which was distinctive, indeed, among the somber colors of that sage-gray land.

Jim inquired if he had a horse, the growing interest of a friend in his manner. Hearing the facts of the case from Lambert — before dawn he had heard them from Taterleg — he appeared concerned almost to the point of being troubled.

"You'll have to git you a horse, Duke; you'll have to ride up to the boss when you hit him for a job. He never was known to hire a man off the ground, and I guess if you was to head at

him on that bicycle, he'd blow a hole through you as big as a can of salmon. Any of you fellers got a horse you want to trade the Duke for his bicycle?"

The inquiry brought out a round of somewhat cloudy witticism, with proposals to Lambert for an exchange on terms rather embarrassing to meet, seeing that even the least preposterous was not sincere. Taterleg winked to assure him that it was all banter, without a bit of harm at the bottom of it, which Lambert understood very well without the services of a commentator.

Jim brightened up presently, as if he saw a gleam that might lead Lambert out of the difficulty. He had an extra horse himself, not much of a horse to look at, but as good-hearted a horse as a man ever throwed a leg over, and that wasn't no lie, if you took him the right side on. But you had to take him the right side on, and humor him, and handle him like eggs till he got used to you. Then you had as purty a little horse as a man ever throwed a leg over, anywhere.

Jim said he'd offer that horse, only he was

a little bashful in the presence of strangers — meaning the horse — and didn't show up in a style to make his owner proud of him. The trouble with that horse was he used to belong to a one-legged man, and got so accustomed to the feel of a one-legged man on him that he was plumb foolish between two legs.

That horse didn't have much style to him, and no gait to speak of; but he was as good a cow-horse as ever chawed a bit. If the Duke thought he'd be able to ride him, he was welcome to him. Taterleg winked what Lambert interpreted as a warning at that point, and in the faces of the others there were little gleams of humor, which they turned their heads, or bent to study the ground, as Siwash did, to hide.

"Well, I'm not much on a horse," Lambert confessed.

"You look like a man that'd been on a horse a time or two," said Jim, with a knowing inflection, a shrewd flattery.

"I used to ride around a little, but that's been a good while ago."

"A feller never forgits how to ride," Siwash put in; "and if a man wants to work on the

range, he's got to ride 'less'n he goes and gits a job runnin' sheep, and that's below any man that *is* a man."

Jim sat pondering the question, hands hooked in front of his knees, a match in his mouth beside his unlighted cigarette.

"I been thinkin' I'd sell that horse," said he reflectively. "Ain't got no use for him much; but I don't know."

He looked off over the chuck wagon, through the tops of the scrub pines in which the camp was set, drawing his thin, white eyebrows, considering the case.

"Winter comin' on and hay to buy," said Siwash.

"That's what I've been thinkin' and studyin' over. Shucks! I don't need that horse. I tell you what I'll do, Duke "— turning to Lambert, brisk as with a gush of sudden generosity — "if you can ride that old pelter, I'll give him to you for a present. And I bet you'll not git as cheap an offer of a horse as that ever in your life ag'in."

"I think it's too generous — I wouldn't want to take advantage of it," Lambert told him, try-

ing to show a modesty in the matter that he did not feel.

"I ain't a-favorin' you, Duke; not a dollar. If I needed that horse, I'd hang onto him, and you wouldn't git him a cent under thirty-five bucks; but when a man don't need a horse, and it's a expense on him, he can afford to give it away — he can give it away and make money. That's what I'm a-doin', if you want to take me up."

"I'll take a look at him, Jim."

Jim got up with eagerness, and went to fetch a saddle and bridle from under the wagon. The others came into the transaction with lively interest. Only Taterleg edged round to Lambert, and whispered with his head turned away to look like innocence:

"Watch out for him — he's a bal'-faced hyeeny!"

They trooped off to the corral, which was a temporary enclosure made of wire run among the little pines. Jim brought the horse out. It stood tamely enough to be saddled, with head drooping indifferently, and showed no deeper interest and no resentment over the operation

of bridling, Jim talking all the time he worked, like the faker that he was, to draw off a too-close inspection of his wares.

"Old Whetstone ain't much to look at," he said, "and as I told you, Mister, he ain't got no fancy gait; but he can bust the middle out of the breeze when he lays out a straight-ahead run. Ain't a horse on this range can touch his tail when old Whetstone throws a ham into it and lets out his stren'th."

"He looks like he might go some," Lambert commented in the vacuous way of a man who felt that he must say something, even though he didn't know anything about it.

Whetstone was rather above the stature of the general run of range horses, with clean legs and a good chest. But he was a hammer-headed, white-eyed, short-maned beast, of a pale water-color yellow, like an old dish. He had a beaten-down, bedraggled, and dispirited look about him, as if he had carried men's burdens beyond his strength for a good while, and had no heart in him to take the road again. He had a scoundrelly way of rolling his eyes to watch all that went on about him without turning his head.

Jim girthed him and cinched him, soundly and securely, for no matter who was pitched off and smashed up in that ride, he didn't want the saddle to turn and be ruined.

"Well, there he stands, Duke, and saddle and bridle goes with him if you're able to ride him. I'll be generous; I won't go half-way with you; I'll be whole hog or none. Saddle and bridle goes with Whetstone, all a free gift, if you can ride him, Duke. I want to start you up right."

It was a safe offer, taking all precedent into account, for no man ever had ridden Whetstone, not even his owner. The beast was an outlaw of the most pronounced type, with a repertory of tricks, calculated to get a man off his back, so extensive that he never seemed to repeat. He stood always as docilely as a camel to be saddled and bridled, with what method in this apparent docility no man versed in horse philosophy ever had been able to reason out. Perhaps it was that he had been born with a spite against man, and this was his scheme for luring him on to his discomfiture and disgrace.

It was an expectant little group that stood by to witness this greenhorn's rise and fall. Ac-

cording to his established methods, Whetstone would allow him to mount, still standing with that indifferent droop to his head. But one who was sharp would observe that he was rolling his old white eyes back to see, tipping his sharp ear like a wildcat to hear every scrape and creak of the leather. Then, with the man in the saddle, nobody knew what he would do.

That uncertainty was what made Whetstone valuable and interesting beyond any outlaw in the world. Men grew accustomed to the tricks of ordinary pitching broncos, in time, and the novelty and charm were gone. Besides, there nearly always was somebody who could ride the worst of them. Not so Whetstone. He had won a good deal of money for Jim, and everybody in camp knew that thirty-five dollars wasn't more than a third of the value that his owner put upon him.

There was boundless wonder among them, then, and no little admiration, when this stranger who had come into that unlikely place on a bicycle leaped into the saddle so quickly that old Whetstone was taken completely by surprise, and held him with such a strong hand and

stiff rein that his initiative was taken from him.

The greenhorn's next maneuver was to swing the animal round till he lost his head, then clap heels to him and send him off as if he had business for the day laid out ahead of him.

It was the most amazing start that anybody ever had been known to make on Whetstone, and the most startling and enjoyable thing about it was that this strange, overgrown boy, with his open face and guileless speech, had played them all for a bunch of suckers, and knew more about riding in a minute than they ever had learned in their lives.

Jim Wilder stood by, swearing by all his obscene deities that if that man hurt Whetstone, he'd kill him for his hide. But he began to feel better in a little while. Hope, even certainty, picked up again. Whetstone was coming to himself. Perhaps the old rascal had only been elaborating his scheme a little at the start, and was now about to show them that their faith in him was not misplaced.

The horse had come to a sudden stop, legs stretched so wide that it seemed as if he surely must break in the middle. But he gathered his

feet together so quickly that the next view presented him with his back arched like a fighting cat's. And there on top of him rode the Duke, his small brown hat in place, his gay shirt ruffling in the wind.

After that there came, so quickly that it made the mind and eye hasten to follow, all the tricks that Whetstone ever had tried in his past triumphs over men; and through all of them, sharp, shrewd, unexpected, startling as some of them were, that little brown hat rode untroubled on top. Old Whetstone was as wet at the end of ten minutes as if he had swum a river. He grunted with anger as he heaved and lashed, he squealed in his resentful passion as he swerved, lunged, pitched, and clawed the air.

The little band of spectators cheered the Duke, calling loudly to inform him that he was the only man who ever had stuck that long. The Duke waved his hat in acknowledgement, and put it back on with deliberation and exactness, while old Whetstone, as mad as a wet hen, tried to roll down suddenly and crush his legs.

Nothing to be accomplished by that old trick. The Duke pulled him up with a wrench that

made him squeal, and Whetstone, lifted off his forelegs, attempted to complete the backward turn and catch his tormentor under the saddle. But that was another trick so old that the simplest horseman knew how to meet it. The next thing he knew, Whetstone was galloping along like a gentleman, just wind enough in him to carry him, not an ounce to spare.

Jim Wilder was swearing himself blue. It was a trick, an imposition, he declared. No circus-rider could come there and abuse old Whetstone that way and live to eat his dinner. Nobody appeared to share his view of it. They were a unit in declaring that the Duke beat any man handling a horse they ever saw. If Whetstone didn't get him off pretty soon, he would be whipped and conquered, his belly on the ground.

"If he hurts that horse I'll blow a hole in him as big as a can of salmon!" Jim declared.

"Take your medicine like a man, Jim," Siwash advised. "You might know somebody'd come along that'd ride him, in time."

"Yes, *come* along!" said Jim with a sneer.

Whetstone had begun to collect himself out

on the flat among the sagebrush a quarter of a mile away. The frenzy of desperation was in him. He was resorting to the raw, low, common tricks of the ordinary outlaw, even to biting at his rider's legs. That ungentlemanly behavior was costly, as he quickly learned, at the expense of a badly cut mouth. He never had met a rider before who had energy to spare from his efforts to stick in the saddle to slam him a big kick in the mouth when he doubled himself to make that vicious snap. The sound of that kick carried to the corral.

"I'll fix you for that!" Jim swore.

He was breathing as hard as his horse, sweat of anxiety running down his face. The Duke was bringing the horse back, his spirit pretty well broken, it appeared.

"What do you care what he does to him? It ain't your horse no more."

It was Taterleg who said that, standing near Jim, a little way behind him, as gorgeous as a bridegroom in the bright sun.

"You fellers can't ring me in on no game like that and beat me out of my horse!" said Jim, redder than ever in his passion.

"Who do you mean, rung you in, you little, flannel-faced fiste? "[1] Siwash demanded, whirling round on him with blood in his eye.

Jim was standing with his legs apart, bent a little at the knees, as if he intended to make a jump. His right hand was near the butt of his gun, his fingers were clasping and unclasping, as if he limbered them for action. Taterleg slipped up behind him on his toes, and jerked the gun from Jim's scabbard with quick and sure hand. He backed away with it, presenting it with determined mien as Jim turned on him and cursed him by all his lurid gods.

"If you fight anybody in this camp today, Jim, you'll fight like a man," said Taterleg, "or you'll hobble out of it on three legs, like a wolf."

The Duke was riding old Whetstone like a feather, letting him have his spurts of kicking and stiff-legged bouncing without any effort to restrain him at all. There wasn't much steam in the outlaw's antics now; any common man could have ridden him without losing his hat.

Jim had drawn apart from the others, resent-

[1] Fice — dog.

ful of the distrust that Taterleg had shown, but more than half of his courage and bluster taken away from him with his gun. He was swearing more volubly than ever to cover his other deficiencies; but he was a man to be feared only when he had his weapon under his hand.

The Duke had brought the horse almost back to camp when the animal was taken with an extraordinarily vicious spasm of pitching, broken by sudden efforts to fling himself down and roll over on his persistent rider. The Duke let him have it his way, all but the rolling, for a while; then he appeared to lose patience with the stubborn beast. He headed him into the open, laid the quirt to him, and galloped toward the hills.

"That's the move — run the devil out of him," said one.

The Duke kept him going, and going for all there was in him. Horse and rider were dim in the dust of the heated race against the evil passion, the untamed demon, in the savage creature's heart. It began to look as if Lambert never intended to come back. Jim saw it that way. He came over to Taterleg as hot as a hornet.

"Give me that gun — I'm goin' after him!"

"You'll have to go without it, Jim."

Jim blasted him to sulphurous perdition, and split him with forked lightning from his blasphemous tongue.

"He'll come back; he's just runnin' the vinegar out of him," said one.

"Come back — hell!" said Jim.

"If he don't come back, that's his business. A man can go wherever he wants to go on his own horse, I guess."

That was the observation of Siwash, standing there rather glum and out of tune over Jim's charge that they had rung the Duke in on him to beat him out of his animal.

"It was a put-up job! I'll split that feller like a hog!"

Jim left them with that declaration of his benevolent intention, hurrying to the corral where his horse was, his saddle on the ground by the gate. They watched him saddle, and saw him mount and ride after the Duke, with no comment on his actions at all.

The Duke was out of sight in the scrub timber at the foot of the hills, but his dust still

floated like the wake of a swift boat, showing the way he had gone.

"Yes, you will!" said Taterleg.

Meaningless, irrelevant, as that fragmentary ejaculation seemed, the others understood. They grinned, and twisted wise heads, spat out their tobacco, and went back to dinner.

CHAPTER III

AN EMPTY SADDLE

THE Duke was seen coming back before the meal was over, across the little plain between camp and hills. A quarter of a mile behind him Jim Wilder rode, whether seen or unseen by the man in the lead they did not know.

Jim had fallen behind somewhat by the time the Duke reached camp. The admiration of all hands over this triumph against horseflesh and the devil within it was so great that they got up to welcome the Duke, and shake hands with him as he left the saddle. He was as fresh and nimble, unshaken and serene, as when he mounted old Whetstone more than an hour before.

Whetstone was a conquered beast, beyond any man's doubt. He stood with flaring nostrils, scooping in his breath, not a dry hair on him, not a dash of vinegar in his veins.

"Where's Jim?" the Duke inquired.

"Comin'," Taterleg replied, waving his hand afield.

"What's he doin' out there — where's he been?" the Duke inquired, a puzzled look in his face, searching their sober countenances for his answer.

"He thought you ——"

"Let him do his own talkin', kid," said Siwash, cutting off the cowboy's explanation.

Siwash looked at the Duke shrewdly, his head cocked to one side like a robin listening for a worm.

"What outfit was you with before you started out sellin' them tooth-puller-can-opener machines, son?" he inquired.

"Outfit? What kind of an outfit?"

"Ranch, innercence; what range was you ridin' on?"

"I never rode any range, I'm sorry to say."

"Well, where in the name of mustard did you learn to ride?"

"I used to break range horses for five dollars a head at the Kansas City Stockyards. That was a good while ago; I'm all out of practice now."

"Yes, and I bet you can throw a rope, too."

"Nothing to speak of."

"Nothing to speak of! Yes, I'll *bet* you nothing to speak of!"

Jim didn't stop at the corral to turn in his horse, but came clattering into camp, madder for the race that the Duke had led him in ignorance of his pursuit, as every man could see. He flung himself out of the saddle with a flip like a bird taking to the wing, his spurs cutting the ground as he came over to where Lambert stood.

"Maybe you can ride my horse, you damn granger, but you can't ride me!" he said.

He threw off his vest as he spoke, that being his only superfluous garment, and bowed his back for a fight. Lambert looked at him with a flush of indignant contempt spreading in his face.

"You don't need to get sore about it; I only took you up at your own game," he said.

"No circus-ringer's goin' to come in here and beat me out of my horse. You'll either put him back in that corral or you'll chaw leather with me!"

"I'll put him back in the corral when I'm ready, but I'll put him back as mine. I won him on your own bet, and it'll take a whole lot better man than you to take him away from me."

In the manner of youth and independence, Lambert got hotter with every word, and after that there wasn't much room for anything else to be said on either side. They mixed it, and they mixed it briskly, for Jim's contempt for a man who wore a hat like that supplied the courage that had been drained from him when he was disarmed.

There was nothing epic in that fight, nothing heroic at all. It was a wildcat struggle in the dust, no more science on either side than nature put into their hands at the beginning. But they surely did kick up a lot of dust. It would have been a peaceful enough little fight, with a handshake at the end and all over in an hour, very likely, if Jim hadn't managed to get out his knife when he felt himself in for a trimming.

It was a mean-looking knife, with a buckhorn handle and a four-inch blade that leaped open on pressure of a spring. Its type was

widely popular all over the West in those days, but one of them would be almost a curiosity now. But Jim had it out, anyhow, lying on his back with the Duke's knee on his ribs, and was whittling away before any man could raise a hand to stop him.

The first slash split the Duke's cheek for two inches just below his eye; the next tore his shirt sleeve from shoulder to elbow, grazing the skin as it passed. And there somebody kicked Jim's elbow and knocked the knife out of his hand.

"Let him up, Duke," he said.

Lambert released the strangle hold that he had taken on Jim's throat and looked up. It was Spence, standing there with his horse behind him. He laid his hand on Lambert's shoulder.

"Let him up, Duke," he said again.

Lambert got up, bleeding a cataract. Jim bounced to his feet like a spring, his hand to his empty holster, a look of dismay in his blanching face.

"That's your size, you nigger!" Spence said, kicking the knife beyond Jim's reach. "That's the kind of a low-down cuss you al-

ways was. This man's our guest, and when you pull a knife on him you pull it on me!"

"You know I ain't got a gun on me, you ——"

"Git it, you sneakin' houn'!"

Jim looked round for Taterleg.

"Where's my gun? you greasy potslinger!"

"Give it to him, whoever's got it."

Taterleg produced it. Jim began backing off as soon as he had it in his hand, watching Spence alertly. Lambert leaped between them.

"Gentlemen, don't go to shootin' over a little thing like this!" he begged.

Taterleg came between them, also, and Siwash, quite blocking up the fairway.

"Now, boys, put up your guns; this is Sunday, you know," Siwash said.

"Give me room, men!" Spence commanded, in voice that trembled with passion, with the memory of old quarrels, old wrongs, which this last insult to the camp's guest gave the excuse for wiping out. There was something in his tone not to be denied; they fell out of his path as if the wind had blown them. Jim fired, his elbow against his ribs.

Too confident of his own speed, or forgetting that Wilder already had his weapon out, Spence crumpled at the knees, toppled backward, fell. His pistol, half-drawn, dropped from the holster and lay at his side. Wilder came a step nearer and fired another shot into the fallen man's body, dead as he must have known him to be. He ran on to his horse, mounted, and rode away.

Some of the others hurried to the wagon after their guns. Lambert, for a moment shocked to the heart by the sudden horror of the tragedy, bent over the body of the man who had taken up his quarrel without even knowing the merits of it, or whose fault lay at the beginning. A look into his face was enough to tell that there was nothing within the compass of this earth that could bring back life to that strong, young body, struck down in a breath like a broken vase. He looked up. Jim Wilder was bending in the saddle as he rode swiftly away, as if he expected them to shoot. A great fire of resentment for this man's destructive deed swept over him, hotter than the hot blood wasting from his wounded cheek. The passion of vengeance

wrenched his joints, his hand shook and grew cold, as he stooped again to unfasten the belt about his friend's dead body.

Armed with the weapon that had been drawn a fraction of a second too late, drawn in the chivalrous defense of hospitality, the high courtesy of an obligation to a stranger, Lambert mounted the horse that had come to be his at the price of this tragedy, and galloped in pursuit of the fleeing man.

Some of the young men were hurrying to the corral, belting on their guns as they ran to fetch their horses and join the pursuit. Siwash called them back.

"Leave it to him, boys; it's his by rights," he said.

Taterleg stood looking after the two riders, the hindmost drawing steadily upon the leader, and stood looking so until they disappeared in the timber at the base of the hills.

"My God!" said he. And again, after a little while: "My God!"

It was dusk when Lambert came back, leading Jim Wilder's horse. There was blood on the empty saddle.

CHAPTER IV

"AND SPEAK IN PASSING"

THE events of that Sunday introduced Lambert into the Bad Lands and established his name and fame. Within three months after going to work for the Syndicate ranch he was known for a hundred miles around as the man who had broken Jim Wilder's outlaw and won the horse by that unparalleled feat.

That was the prop to his fame — that he had broken Jim Wilder's outlaw. Certainly he was admired and commended for the unhesitating action he had taken in avenging the death of his friend, but in that he had done only what was expected of any man worthy the name. Breaking the outlaw was a different matter entirely. In doing that he had accomplished what was believed to be beyond the power of any living man.

According to his own belief, his own conscience, Lambert had made a bad start. A

career that had its beginning in contentions and violence, enough of it crowded into one day to make more than the allotment of an ordinary life, could not terminate with any degree of felicity and honor. They thought little of killing a man in that country, it seemed; no more than a perfunctory inquiry, to fulfill the letter of the law, had been made by the authorities into Jim Wilder's death.

While it relieved him to know that the law held his justification to be ample, there was a shadow following him which he could not evade in any of the hilarious diversions common to those wild souls of the range.

It troubled him that he had killed a man, even in a fair fight in the open field with the justification of society at his back. In his sleep it harried him with visions; awake, it oppressed him like a sorrow, or the memory of a shame. He became solemn and silent as a chastened man, seldom smiling, laughing never.

When he drank with his companions in the little saloon at Misery, the loading station on the railroad, he took his liquor as gravely as the sacrament; when he raced them he rode with

face grim as an Indian, never whooping in victory, never swearing in defeat.

He had left even his own lawful and proper name behind him with his past. Far and near he was known as the Duke of Chimney Butte, shortened in cases of direct address to "Duke." He didn't resent it, rather took a sort of grim pride in it, although he felt at times that it was one more mark of his surrender to circumstances whose current he might have avoided at the beginning by the exercise of a proper man's sense.

A man was expected to drink a good deal of the overardent spirits which were sold at Misery. If he could drink without becoming noisy, so much the more to his credit, so much higher he stood in the estimation of his fellows as a copper-bottomed sport of the true blood. The Duke could put more of that notorious whisky under cover, and still contain himself, than any man they ever had seen in Misery. The more he drank the glummer he became, but he never had been known either to weep or curse.

Older men spoke to him with respect, younger

ones approached him with admiration, unable to understand what kind of a safety-valve a man had on his mouth that would keep his steam in when that Misery booze began to sizzle in his pipes. His horse was a subject of interest almost equal to himself.

Under his hand old Whetstone — although not more than seven — had developed unexpected qualities. When the animal's persecution ceased, his perversity fled. He grew into a well-conditioned creature, sleek of coat, beautiful of tail as an Arab barb, bright of eye, handsome to behold. His speed and endurance were matters of as much note as his outlawry had been but a little while before, and his intelligence was something almost beyond belief.

Lambert had grown exceedingly fond of him, holding him more in the estimation of a companion than the valuation of a dumb creature of burden. When they rode the long watches at night he talked to him, and Whetstone would put back his sensitive ear and listen, and toss his head in joyful appreciation of his master's confidence and praise.

Few horses had beaten Whetstone in a race

since he became the Duke's property. It was believed that none on that range could do it if the Duke wanted to put him to his limit. It was said that the Duke lost only such races as he felt necessary to the continuance of his prosperity.

Racing was one of the main diversions when the cowboys from the surrounding ranches met at Misery on a Sunday afternoon, or when loading cattle there. Few trains stopped at Misery, a circumstance resented by the cowboys, who believed the place should be as important to all the world as it was to them. To show their contempt for this aloof behavior they usually raced the trains, frequently outrunning those westward bound as they labored up the long grade.

Freight trains especially they took delight in beating, seeing how it nettled the train crews. There was nothing more delightful in any program of amusement that a cowboy could conceive than riding abreast of a laboring freight engine, the sulky engineer crowding every pound of power into the cylinders, the sooty fireman humping his back throwing in coal. Only one triumph would have been sweeter —

to outrun the big passenger train from Chicago with the brass-fenced car at the end.

No man ever had done that yet, although many had tried. The engineers all knew what to expect on a Sunday afternoon when they approached Misery, where the cowboys came through the fence and raced the trains on the right-of-way. A long, level stretch of soft gray earth, set with bunches of grass here and there, began a mile beyond the station, unmarred by steam-shovel or grader's scraper. A man could ride it with his eyes shut; a horse could cover it at its best.

That was the racing ground over which they had contended with the Chicago-Puget Sound flier for many years, and a place which engineers and firemen prepared to pass quickly while yet a considerable distance away. It was a sight to see the big engine round the curve below, its plume of smoke rising straight for twenty feet, streaming back like a running girl's hair, the cowboys all set in their saddles, waiting to go.

Engineers on the flier were not so sulky about it, knowing that the race was theirs before it

was run. Usually they leaned out of the window and urged the riders on with beckoning, derisive hand, while the fireman stood by grinning, confident of the head of steam he had begun storing for this emergency far down the road.

Porters told passengers about these wild horsemen in advance, and eager faces lined the windows on that side of the cars as they approached Misery, and all who could pack on the end of the observation car assembled there. In spite of its name, Misery was quite a comfortable break in the day's monotony for travelers on a Sunday afternoon.

Amid the hardships and scant diversions of this life, Lambert spent his first winter in the Bad Lands, drinking in the noisy revels at Misery, riding the long, bitter miles back to the ranch, despising himself for being so mean and low. It was a life in which a man's soul would either shrink to nothing or expand until it became too large to find contentment within the horizon of such an existence.

Some of them expanded up to the size for ranch owners, superintendents, bosses; stopped

there, set in their mold. Lambert never had heard of one stretching so wide that he was drawn out of himself entirely, his eyes fixed on the far light of a nobler life. He liked to imagine a man so inspired out of the lonely watches, the stormy rides, the battle against blizzard and night.

This train of thought had carried him away that gentle spring day as he rode to Misery. He resented the thought that he might have to spend his youth as a hired servant in this rough occupation, unremunerative below the hope of ever gaining enough to make a start in business for himself. There was no romance in it, for all that had been written, no beautiful daughter of the ranch owner to be married, and a fortune gained with her.

Daughters there must be, indeed, among the many stockholders in that big business, but they were not available in the Bad Lands. The superintendent of the ranch had three or four, born to that estate, full of loud laughter, ordinary as baled hay. A man would be a loser in marrying such as they, even with a fortune ready made.

What better could that rough country offer? People are no gentler than their pursuits, no finer than the requirements of their lives. Daughters of the Bad Lands, such as he had seen of them in the wives to whom he once had tried to sell the All-in-One, and the superintendent's girls were not intended for any other life. As for him, if he had to live it out there, with the shadow of a dead man at his heels, he would live it alone. So he thought, going on his way to Misery, where there was to be racing that afternoon, and a grand effort to keep up with the Chicago flier.

Lambert never had taken part in that long-standing competition. It appeared to him a senseless expenditure of horseflesh, a childish pursuit of the wind. Yet, foolish as it was, he liked to watch them. There was a thrill in the sweeping start of twenty or thirty horsemen that warmed a man, making him feel as if he must whoop and wave his hat. There was a belief alive among them that some day a man would come who would run the train neck and neck to the depot platform.

Not much distinction in it, even so, said he.

But it set him musing and considering as he rode, his face quickening out of its somber cloud. A little while after his arrival at Misery the news went round that the Duke was willing at last to enter the race against the flier.

True to his peculiarities, the Duke had made conditions. He was willing to race, but only if everybody else would keep out of it and give him a clear and open field. Taterleg Wilson, the bow-legged camp cook of the Syndicate, circulated himself like a petition to gain consent to this unusual proposal.

It was asking a great deal of those men to give up their established diversion, no matter how distinguished the man in whose favor they were requested to stand aside. That Sunday afternoon race had become as much a fixed institution in the Bad Lands as the railroad itself. With some argument, some bucking and snorting, a considerable cost to Taterleg for liquor and cigars, they agreed to it. Taterleg said he could state, authoritatively, that this would be the Duke's first, last, and only ride against the flier. It would be worth money to stand off and watch it, he said, and worth putting money

on the result. When, where, would a man ever have a chance to see such a race again? Perhaps never in his life.

On time, to a dot, the station agent told the committee headed by Taterleg, which had gone to inquire in the grave and important manner of men conducting a ceremony. The committee went back to the saloon, and pressed the Duke to have a drink. He refused, as he had refused politely and consistently all day. A man could fight on booze, he said, but it was a mighty poor foundation for business.

There was a larger crowd in Misery that day than usual for the time of year, it being the first general holiday after the winter's hard exactions. In addition to visitors, all Misery turned out to see the race, lining up at the right-of-way fence as far as they would go, which was not a great distance along. The saloon-keeper could see the finish from his door. On the start of it he was not concerned, but he had money up on the end.

Lambert hadn't as much flesh, by a good many pounds, as he had carried into the Bad Lands on his bicycle. One who had known him previously

would have thought that seven years had passed him, making him over completely, indeed, since then. His face was thin, browned and weathered, his body sinewy, its leanness aggravated by its length. He was as light in the saddle as a leaf on the wind.

He was quite a barbaric figure as he waited to mount and ride against the train, which could be heard whistling far down the road. Coatless, in flannel shirt, a bright silk handkerchief round his neck; calfskin vest, tanned with the hair on, its color red and white; dressed leather chaps, a pair of boots that had cost him two-thirds of a month's pay. His hat was like forty others in the crowd, doe-colored, worn with the high crown full-standing, a leather thong at the back of the head, the brim drooping a bit from the weather, so broad that his face looked narrower and sharper in its shadow.

Nothing like the full-blooded young aggie who had come into the Bad Lands to found his fortune a little less than a year before, and about as different from him in thought and outlook upon life as in physical appearance. The psychology of environment is a powerful force.

A score or more of horsemen were strung out along the course, where they had stationed themselves to watch the race at its successive stages, and cheer their champion on his way. At the starting-point the Duke waited alone; at the station a crowd of cowboys lolled in their saddles, not caring to make a run to see the finish.

It was customary for the horsemen who raced the flier to wait on the ground until the engine rounded the curve, then mount and settle to the race. It was counted fair, also, owing to the headway the train already had, to start a hundred yards or so before the engine came abreast, in order to limber up to the horses' best speed.

For two miles or more the track ran straight after that curve, Misery about the middle of the stretch. In that long, straight reach the builders of the road had begun the easement of the stiff grade through the hills beyond. It was the beginning of a hard climb, a stretch in which west-bound trains gathered headway to carry them over the top. Engines came panting round that curve, laboring with the strain of

their load, speed reduced half, and dropping a bit lower as they proceeded up the grade.

This Sunday, as usual, train crew and passengers were on the lookout for the game sportsmen of Misery. Already the engineer was leaning out of his window, arm extended, ready to give the derisive challenge to come on as he swept by.

The Duke was in the saddle, holding in Whetstone with stiff rein, for the animal was trembling with eagerness to spring away, knowing very well from the preparations which had been going forward that some big event in the lives of his master and himself was pending. The Duke held him, looking back over his shoulder, measuring the distance as the train came sweeping grandly round the curve. He waited until the engine was within a hundred feet of him before he loosed rein and let old Whetstone go.

A yell ran up the line of spectators as the pale yellow horse reached out his long neck, chin level against the wind like a swimmer, and ran as no horse ever had run on that race-course before. Every horseman there knew that the Duke was still holding him in, allowing the train

to creep up on him as if he scorned to take advantage of the handicap.

The engineer saw that this was going to be a different kind of race from the yelling, chattering troop of wild riders which he had been outrunning with unbroken regularity. In that yellow streak of horse, that low-bending, bony rider, he saw a possibility of defeat and disgrace. His head disappeared out of the window, his derisive hand vanished. He was turning valves and pulling levers, trying to coax a little more power into his piston strokes.

The Duke held Whetstone back until his wind had set to the labor, his muscles flexed, his sinews stretched to the race. A third of the race was covered when the engine came neck and neck with the horse, and the engineer, confident now, leaned far out, swinging his hand like the oar of a boat, and shouted:

"Come on! Come on!"

Just a moment too soon this confidence, a moment too soon this defiance. It was the Duke's program to run this thing neck and neck, force to force, with no advantage asked or taken. Then if he could gather speed and beat the en-

gine on the home stretch no man, on the train or off, could say that he had done it with the advantage of a handicap.

There was a great whooping, a great thumping of hoofs, a monstrous swirl of dust, as the riders at the side of the race-course saw the Duke's maneuver and read his intention. Away they swept, a noisy troop, like a flight of blackbirds, hats off, guns popping, in a scramble to get up as close to the finishing line as possible.

Never before in the long history of that unique contest had there been so much excitement. Porters opened the vestibule doors, allowing passengers to crowd the steps; windows were opened, heads thrust out, every tongue urging the horseman on with cheers.

The Duke was riding beside the engineer, not ten feet between them. More than half the course was run, and there the Duke hung, the engine not gaining an inch. The engineer was on his feet now, hand on the throttle lever, although it was open as wide as it could be pulled. The fireman was throwing coal into the furnace, looking round over his shoulder now and then at the persistent horseman who would

not be outrun, his eyes white in his grimy face.

On the observation car women hung over the rail at the side, waving handkerchiefs at the rider's back; along the fence the inhabitants of Misery broke away like leaves before a wind and went running toward the depot; ahead of the racing horse and engine the mounted men who had taken a big start rode on toward the station in a wild, delirious charge.

Neck and neck with the engine old Whetstone ran, throwing his long legs like a wolfhound, his long neck stretched, his ears flat, not leaving a hair that he could control outstanding to catch the wind. The engineer was peering ahead with fixed eyes now, as if he feared to look again on this puny combination of horse and man that was holding its own in this unequal trial of strength.

Within three hundred yards of the station platform, which sloped down at the end like a continuation of the course, the Duke touched old Whetstone's neck with the tips of his fingers. As if he had given a signal upon which they had agreed, the horse gathered power, grunting as he used to grunt in the days of his

outlawry, and bounded away from the cab window, where the greasy engineer stood with white face and set jaw.

Yard by yard the horse gained, his long mane flying, his long tail astream, foam on his lips, forging past the great driving wheels which ground against the rails; past the swinging piston; past the powerful black cylinders; past the stubby pilot, advancing like a shadow over the track. When Whetstone's hoofs struck the planks of the platform, marking the end of the course, he was more than the length of the engine in the lead.

The Duke sat there waving his hand solemnly to those who cheered him as the train swept past, the punchers around him lifting up a joyful chorus of shots and shouts, showing off on their own account to a considerable extent, but sincere over all because of the victory that the Duke had won.

Old Whetstone was standing where he had stopped, within a few feet of the track, front hoofs on the boards of the platform, not more than nicely warmed up for another race, it appeared. As the observation car passed, a young

woman leaned over the rail, handkerchief reached out to the Duke as if trying to give it to him.

He saw her only a second before she passed, too late to make even a futile attempt to possess the favor of her appreciation. She laughed, waving it to him, holding it out as if in challenge for him to come and take it. Without wasting a precious fragment of a second in hesitation the Duke sent Whetstone thundering along the platform in pursuit of the train.

It seemed a foolish thing to do, and a risky venture, for the platform was old, its planks were weak in places. It was not above a hundred feet long, and beyond it only a short stretch of right-of-way until the public road crossed the track, the fence running down to the cattle guard, blocking his hope of overtaking the train.

More than that, the train was picking up speed, as if the engineer wanted to get out of sight and hearing of that demonstrative crowd, and put his humiliation behind him as quickly as possible. No man's horse could make a start with planks under his feet, run two hundred

yards and overtake that train, no matter what the inducement. That was the thought of every man who sat a saddle there and stretched his neck to witness this unparalleled streak of folly.

If Whetstone had run swiftly in the first race, he fairly whistled through the air like a wild duck in the second. Before he had run the length of the platform he had gained on the train, his nose almost even with the brass railing over which the girl leaned, the handkerchief in her hand. Midway between the platform and the cattle guard they saw the Duke lean in his saddle and snatch the white favor from her hand.

The people on the train end cheered this feat of quick resolution, quicker action. But the girl whose handkerchief the Duke had won only leaned on the railing, holding fast with both hands, as if she offered her lips to be kissed, and looked at him with a pleasure in her face that he could read as the train bore her onward into the West.

The Duke sat there with his hat in his hand, gazing after her, only her straining face in his vision, centered out of the dust and widening

distance like a star that a man gazes on to fix his course before it is overwhelmed by clouds.

The Duke sat watching after her, the train reducing the distance like a vision that melts out of the heart with a sigh. She raised her hand as the dust closed in the wake of the train. He thought she beckoned him.

So she came, and went, crossing his way in the Bad Lands in that hour of his small triumph, and left her perfumed token of appreciation in his hand. The Duke put it away in the pocket of his shirt beneath the calfskin vest, the faint delicacy of its perfume rising to his nostrils like the elusive scent of a violet for which one searches the woodland and cannot find.

The dusty hills had gulped the train that carried her before the Duke rode round the station and joined his noisy comrades. Everybody shook hands with him, everybody invited him to have a drink. He put them off — friend, acquaintance, stranger, on their pressing invitation to drink — with the declaration that his horse came first in his consideration. After he had put Whetstone in the livery barn and fed

him, he would join them for a round, he said.

They trooped into the saloon to square their bets, the Duke going his way to the barn. There they drank and grew noisier than before, to come out from time to time, mount their horses, gallop up and down the road that answered Misery for a street, and shoot good ammunition into the harmless air.

Somebody remarked after a while that the Duke was a long time feeding that horse. Taterleg and others went to investigate. He had not been there, the keeper of the livery barn said. A further look around exhausted all the possible hiding-places of Misery. The Duke was not there.

"Well," said Taterleg, puzzled, "I guess he's went."

CHAPTER V

FEET UPON THE ROAD

"I ALWAYS thought I'd go out West, but somehow I never got around to it," Taterleg said. "How far do you aim to go, Duke?"

"As far as the notion takes me, I guess."

It was about a month after the race that this talk between Taterleg and the Duke took place, on a calm afternoon in a camp far from the site of that one into which the peddler of cutlery had trundled his disabled bicycle a year before. The Duke had put off his calfskin vest, the weather being too hot for it. Even Taterleg had made sacrifices to appearance in favor of comfort, his piratical corduroys being replaced by overalls.

The Duke had quit his job, moved by the desire to travel on and see the world, he said. He said no word to any man about the motive behind that desire, very naturally, for he was not the kind of a man who opened the door of

his heart. But to himself he confessed the hunger for an unknown face, for the lure of an onward-beckoning hand which he was no longer able to ignore.

Since that day she had strained over the brass railing of the car to hold him in her sight until the curtain of dust intervened, he had felt her call urging him into the West, the strength of her beckoning hand drawing him the way she had gone, to search the world for her and find her on some full and glorious day.

"Was you aimin' to sell Whetstone and go on the train, Duke?"

"No, I'm not goin' to sell him yet a while."

The Duke was not a talkative man on any occasion, and now he sat in silence watching the cook kneading out a batch of bread, his thoughts a thousand miles away.

Where, indeed, would the journey that he was shaping in his intention that minute carry him? Somewhere along the railroad between there and Puget Sound the beckoning lady had left the train; somewhere on that long road between mountain and sea she was waiting for him to come.

Taterleg stood his loaves in the sun to rise for the oven, making a considerable rattling about the stove as he put in the fire. A silence fell.

Lambert was waiting for his horse to rest a few hours, and, waiting, he sent his dreams ahead of him where his feet could not follow save by weary roads and slow.

Between Misery and the end of that railroad at the western sea there were many villages, a few cities. A passenger might alight from the Chicago flier at any of them, and be absorbed in the vastness like a drop of water in the desert plain. How was he to know where she had left the train, or whither she had turned afterward, or journeyed, or where she lodged now? It seemed beyond finding out. Assuredly it was a task too great for the life of youth, so evanescent in the score of time, even though so long and heavy to those impatient dreamers who draw themselves onward by its golden chain to the cold, harsh facts of age.

It was a foolish quest, a hopeless one. So reason said. Romance and youth, and the longing that he could not define, rose to confute this

sober argument, flushed and eager, violet scent blowing before.

Who could tell? and perhaps; rash speculations, faint promises. The world was not so broad that two might never meet in it whose ways had touched for one heart-throb and sundered again in a sigh. All his life he had been hearing that it was a small place, after all was said. Perhaps, and who can tell? And so, galloping onward in the free leash of his ardent dreams.

"When was you aimin' to start, Duke?" Taterleg inquired, after a silence so long that Lambert had forgotten he was there.

"In about another hour."

"I wasn't tryin' to hurry you off, Duke. My reason for askin' you was because I thought maybe I might be able to go along with you a piece of the way, if you don't object to my kind of company."

"Why, you're not goin' to jump the job, are you?"

"Yes, I've been thinkin' it over, and I've made up my mind to draw my time tonight. If you'll put off goin' till mornin', I'll start with

you. We can travel together till our roads branch, anyhow."

"I'll be glad to wait for you, old feller. I didn't know — which way ——"

"Wyoming," said Taterleg, sighing. "It's come back on me ag'in."

"Well, a feller has to rove and ramble, I guess."

Taterleg sighed, looking off westward with dreamy eyes. "Yes, if he's got a girl pullin' on his heart," said he.

The Duke started as if he had been accused, his secret read, his soul laid bare; he felt the blood burn in his face, and mount to his eyes like a drift of smoke. But Taterleg was unconscious of this sudden embarrassment, this flash of panic for the thing which the Duke believed lay so deep in his heart no man could ever find it out and laugh at it or make gay over the scented romance. Taterleg was still looking off in a general direction that was westward, a little south of west.

"She's in Wyoming," said Taterleg; "a lady I used to rush out in Great Bend, Kansas, a long time ago."

"Oh," said the Duke, relieved and interested. "How long ago was that?"

"Over four years," sighed Taterleg, as if it might have been a quarter of a century.

"Not so very long, Taterleg."

"Yes, but a lot of fellers can court a girl in four years, Duke."

The Duke thought it over a spell. "Yes, I reckon they can," he allowed. "Don't she ever write to you?"

"I guess I'm more to blame than she is on that, Duke. She *did* write, but I was kind of sour and dropped her. It's hard to git away from, though; it's a-comin' over me ag'in. I might 'a' been married and settled down with that girl now, me and her a-runnin' a oyster parlor in some good little railroad town, if it hadn't 'a' been for a Welshman name of Elwood. He was a stonecutter, that Elwood feller was, Duke, workin' on bridge 'butments on the Santa Fé. That feller told her I was married and had four children; he come between us and bust us up."

"Wasn't he onery!" said the Duke, feelingly.

"I was chef in the hotel where that girl worked waitin' table, drawin' down good money, and savin' it, too. But that derned Welshman got around her and she growed cold. When she left Great Bend she went to Wyoming to take a job — Lander was the town she wrote from, I can put my finger on it in the map with my eyes shut. I met her when she was leavin' for the depot, draggin' along with her grip and no Welshman in a mile of her to give her a hand. I went up and tipped my hat, but I never smiled, Duke, for I was sour over the way that girl she'd treated me. I just took hold of that grip and carried it to the depot for her and tipped my hat to her once more. 'You're a gentleman, whatever they say of you, Mr. Wilson,' she said."

"*She* did?"

"She did, Duke. 'You're a gentleman, Mr. Wilson, whatever they say of you,' she said. Them was her words, Duke. 'Farewell to *you*,' I said, distant and high-mighty, for I was hurt, Duke — I was hurt right down to the bone."

"I bet you was, old feller."

"'Farewell to *you*,' I says, and the tears

come in her eyes, and she says to me — wipin' 'em on a han'kerchief I give her, nothing any Welshman ever done for her, and you can bank on that Duke — she says to me: 'I'll always think of you as a gentleman, Mr. Wilson.' I wasn't onto what that Welshman told her then; I didn't know the straight of it till she wrote and told me after she got to Wyoming."

"It was too bad, old feller."

"Wasn't it hell? I was so sore when she wrote, the way she'd believed that little sawed-off snorter with rock dust in his hair, I never answered that letter for a long time. Well, I got another letter from her about a year after that. She was still in the same place, doin' well. Her name was Nettie Morrison."

"Maybe it is yet, Taterleg."

"Maybe. I've been a-thinkin' I'd go out there and look her up, and if she ain't married, me and her we might let bygones *be* bygones and hitch. I could open a oyster parlor out there on the dough I've saved up; I'd dish 'em up and she'd wait on the table and take in the money. We'd do well, Duke."

"I *bet* you would."

"I got the last letter she wrote — I'll let you see it, Duke."

Taterleg made a rummaging in the chuck wagon, coming out presently with the letter. He stood contemplating it with tender eye.

"Some writer, ain't she, Duke?"

"She sure is a fine writer, Taterleg — writes like a schoolma'am."

"She can talk like one, too. See — 'Lander, Wyo.' It's a little town about as big as my hat, from the looks of it on the map, standin' away off up there alone. I could go to it with my eyes shut, straight as a bee."

"Why don't you write to her, Taterleg?" The Duke could scarcely keep back a smile, so diverting he found this affair of the Welshman, the waitress, and the cook. More comedy than romance, he thought, Taterleg on one side of the fence, that girl on the other.

"I've been a-squarin' off to write," Taterleg replied, "but I don't seem to git the time." He opened his vest to put the letter away close to his heart, it seemed, that it might remind him of his intention and square him quite around to the task. But there was no pocket on the side

covering his heart. Taterleg put the letter next his lung as the nearest approach to that sentimental portion of his anatomy, and sighed long and loud as he buttoned his garment.

"You said you'd put off goin' till mornin', Duke?"

"Sure I will."

"I'll throw my things in a sack and be ready to hit the breeze with you after breakfast. I can write back to the boss for my time."

Morning found them on the road together, the sun at their backs. Taterleg was as brilliant as a humming-bird, even to his belt and scabbard, which had a great many silver tacks driven into them, repeating the letters LW in great characters and small. He said the letters were the initials of his name.

"Lawrence?" the Duke ventured to inquire.

Taterleg looked round him with great caution before answering, although they were at least fifteen miles from camp, and farther than that from the next human habitation. He lowered his voice, rubbing his hand reflectively along the glittering ornaments of his belt.

"Lovelace," he said.

"Not a bad name."

"It ain't no name for a cook," Taterleg said, almost vindictively. "You're the first man I ever told it to, and I'll ask you not to pass it on. I used to go by the name of Larry before they called me Taterleg. I got that name out here in the Bad Lands; it suits *me,* all right."

"It's a queer kind of a name to call a man by. How did they come to give it to you?"

"Well, sir, I give myself that name, you might say, when you come to figger it down to cases. I was breakin' a horse when I first come out here four years ago, headin' at that time for Wyoming. He throwed me. When I didn't hop him ag'in, the boys come over to see if I was busted. When they asked me if I was hurt, I says, 'He snapped my dern old leg like a 'tater.' And from that day on they called me Taterleg. Yes, and I guess I'd 'a' been in Wyoming now, maybe with a oyster parlor and a wife, if it hadn't been for that blame horse." He paused reminiscently; then he said:

"Where was you aimin' to camp tonight, Duke?"

"Where does the flier stop after it passes Misery, going west?"

"It stops for water at Glendora, about fifty or fifty-five miles west, sometimes. I've heard 'em say if a feller buys a ticket for there in Chicago, it'll let him off. But I don't guess it stops there regular. Why, Duke? Was you aimin' to take the flier there?"

"No. We'll stop there tonight, then, if your horse can make it."

"Make it! If he can't I'll eat him raw. He's made seventy-five many a time before today."

So they fared on that first day, in friendly converse. At sunset they drew up on a mesa, high above the treeless, broken country through which they had been riding all day, and saw Glendora in the valley below them.

"There she is," said Taterleg. "I wonder what we're goin' to run into down there?"

CHAPTER VI

ALLUREMENTS OF GLENDORA

IN A bend of the Little Missouri, where it broadened out and took on the appearance of a consequential stream, Glendora lay, a lonely little village with a gray hill behind it.

There was but half a street in Glendora, like a setting for a stage, the railroad in the foreground, the little sun-baked station crouching by it, lonely as the winds which sung by night in the telegraph wires crossing its roof. Here the trains went by with a roar, leaving behind them a cloud of gray dust like a curtain to hide from the eyes of those who strained from their windows to see the little that remained of Glendora, once a place of more consequence than today.

Only enough remained of the town to live by its trade. There was enough flour in the store, enough whisky in the saloon; enough stamps in the post office, enough beds in the hotel, to sat-

isfy with comfort the demands of the far-stretching population of the country contiguous thereto. But if there had risen an extraordinary occasion bringing a demand without notice for a thousand pounds more of flour, a barrel more of whisky, a hundred more stamps or five extra beds, Glendora would have fallen under the burden and collapsed in disgrace.

Close by the station there were cattle pens for loading stock, with two long tracks for holding the cars. In autumn fat cattle were driven down out of the hidden valleys to entrain there for market. In those days there was merriment after nightfall in Glendora. At other times it was mainly a quiet place, the shooting that was done on its one-sided street being of a peaceful nature in the way of expressing a feeling for which some plain-witted, drunken cowherder had no words.

A good many years before the day that the Duke and Taterleg came riding into Glendora, the town had supported more than one store and saloon. The shells of these dead enterprises stood there still, windows and doors boarded up, as if their owners had stopped

their mouths when they went away to prevent a whisper of the secrets they might tell of the old riotous nights, or of fallen hopes, or dishonest transactions. So they stood now in their melancholy, backs against the gray hill, giving to Glendora the appearance of a town that was more than half dead, and soon must fail and pass utterly away in the gray-blowing clouds of dust.

The hotel seemed the brightest and soundest living spot in the place, for it was painted in green, like a watermelon, with a cottonwood tree growing beside the pump at the porch corner. In yellow letters upon the windowpane of the office there appeared the proprietor's name, doubtless the work of some wandering artist who had paid the price of his lodging or his dinner so.

ORSON WOOD, PROP.

said the sign, bedded in curlicues and twisted ornaments, as if a carpenter had planed the letters out of a board, leaving the shavings where they fell. A green rustic bench stood across one end of the long porch, such as is seen in

boarding-houses frequented by railroad men, and chairs with whittled and notched arms before the office door, near the pump.

Into this atmosphere there had come, many years before, one of those innocents among men whose misfortune it is to fall before the beguilements of the dishonest; that sort of man whom the promoters of schemes go out to catch in the manner of an old maid trapping flies in a cup of suds. Milton Philbrook was this man. Somebody had sold him forty thousand acres of land in a body for three dollars an acre. It began at the river and ran back to the hills for a matter of twenty miles.

Philbrook bought the land on the showing that it was rich in coal deposits. Which was true enough. But he was not geologist enough to know that it was only lignite, and not a coal of commercial value in those times. This truth he came to later, together with the knowledge that his land was worth, at the most extravagant valuation, not more than fifty cents an acre.

Finding no market for his brown coal, Philbrook decided to adopt the customs of the coun-

try and turn cattleman. A little inquiry into that business convinced him that the expenses of growing the cattle and the long distance from market absorbed a great bulk of the profits needlessly. He set about with the original plan, therefore, of fencing his forty thousand acres with wire, thus erasing at one bold stroke the cost of hiring men to guard his herds.

A fence in the Bad Lands was unknown outside a corral in those days. When carloads of barbed wire and posts began to arrive at Glendora men came riding in for miles to satisfy themselves that the rumors were founded; when Philbrook hired men to build the fence, and operations were begun, murmurs and threats against the unwelcome innovation were heard. Philbrook pushed the work to conclusion, unmindful of the threats, moved now by the intention of founding a great, baronial estate in that bleak land. His further plan of profit and consequence was to establish a packing-house at Glendora, where his herds could be slaughtered and dressed and shipped neat to market, at once assuring him a double profit and reduced expense. But that was one phase of his dream

that never hardened into the reality of machinery and bricks.

While the long lines of fence were going up, carpenters were at work building a fit seat for Philbrook's baronial aims. The point he chose for his home site was the top of a bare plateau overlooking the river, the face of it gray, crumbling shale, rising three hundred feet in abrupt slope from the water's edge. At great labor and expense Philbrook built a road between Glendora and this place, and carried water in pipes from the river to irrigate the grass, trees, shrubs and blooming plants alien to that country which he planted to break the bleakness of it and make a setting for his costly home.

Here on this jutting shoulder of the cold, unfriendly upland, a house rose which was the wonder of all who beheld it as they rode the wild distances and viewed it from afar. It seemed a mansion to them, its walls gleaming white, its roof green as the hope in its builder's breast. It was a large house, and seemed larger for its prominence against the sky, built in the shape of a T, with wide porches in the angles. And to this place, upon which he had

lavished what remained of his fortune, Philbrook brought his wife and little daughter, as strange to their surroundings as the delicate flowers which pined and drooped in that unfriendly soil.

Immediately upon completion of his fences he had imported well-bred cattle and set them grazing within his confines. He set men to riding by night and day a patrol of his long lines of wire, rifles under their thighs, with orders to shoot anybody found cutting the fences in accordance with the many threats to serve them so. Contentions and feuds began, and battles and bloody encounters, which did not cease through many a turbulent year. Philbrook lived in the saddle, for he was a man of high courage and unbending determination, leaving his wife and child in the suspense and solitude of their grand home in which they found no pleasure.

The trees and shrubs which Philbrook had planted with such care and attended with such hope, withered on the bleak plateau and died, in spite of the water from the river; the delicate grass with which he sought to beautify and

clothe the harsh gray soil sickened and pined away; the shrubs made a short battle against the bleakness of winter, putting out pale, strange flowers like the wan smile of a woman who stands on the threshold of death, then failed away, and died. Mrs. Philbrook broke under the long strain of never-ending battles, and died the spring that her daughter came eighteen years of age.

This girl had grown up in the saddle, a true daughter of her fighting sire. Time and again she had led a patrol of two fence-riders along one side of that sixty square miles of ranch while her father guarded the other. She could handle firearms with speed and accuracy equal to any man on the range, where she had been bearing a man's burden since her early girlhood.

All this information pertaining to the history of Milton Philbrook and his adventures in the Bad Lands, Orson Wood, the one-armed landlord at the hotel in Glendora told Lambert on the evening of the travelers' arrival there. The story had come as the result of questions concerning the great white house on the mesa, the two men sitting on the porch in plain view of it,

Taterleg entertaining the daughter of the hotel across the show case in the office.

Lambert found the story more interesting than anything he ever had imagined of the Bad Lands. Here was romance looking down on him from the lonely walls of that white house, and heroism of a finer kind than these people appreciated, he was sure.

"Is the girl still here?" he inquired.

"Yes, she's back now. She's been away to school in Boston for three or four years, comin' back in summer for a little while."

"When did she come back?"

Lambert felt that his voice was thick as he inquired, disturbed by the eager beating of his heart. Who knows? and perhaps, and all the rest of it came galloping to him with a roar of blood in his ears like the sound of a thousand hoofs. The landlord called over his shoulder to his daughter:

"Alta, when did Vesta Philbrook come back?"

"Four or five weeks ago," said Alta, with the sound of chewing gum.

"Four or five weeks ago," the landlord re-

peated, as though Alta spoke a foreign tongue and must be translated.

"I see," said Lambert, vaguely, shaking to the tips of his fingers with a kind of buck ague that he never had suffered from before. He was afraid the landlord would notice it, and slewed his chair, getting out his tobacco to cover the fool spell.

For that was she, Vesta Philbrook was she, and she was Vesta Philbrook. He knew it as well as he knew that he could count ten. Something had led him there that day; the force that was shaping the course of their two lives to cross again had held him back when he had considered selling his horse and going West a long distance on the train. He grew calmer when he had his cigarette alight. The landlord was talking again.

"Funny thing about Vesta comin' home, too," he said, and stopped a little, as if to consider the humor of it. Lambert looked at him with a sudden wrench of the neck.

"Which?"

"Philbrook's luck held out, it looked like, till she got through her education. All through the

fights he had and the scrapes he run into the last ten years he never got a scratch. Bullets used to hum around that man like bees, and he'd ride through 'em like they *was* bees, but none of 'em ever notched him. Curious, wasn't it? "

" Did somebody get him at last? "

" No, he took typhoid fever. He took down about a week or ten days after Vesta got home. He died about a couple of week ago. Vesta had him laid beside her mother up there on the hill. He said they'd never run him out of this country, livin' or dead."

Lambert swallowed a dry lump.

" Is she running the ranch? "

" Like an old soldier, sir. I tell you, I've got a whole lot of admiration for that girl."

" She must have her hands full."

" Night and day. She's short on fence-riders, and I guess if you boys are lookin' for a job you can land up there with Vesta, all right."

Taterleg and the girl came out and sat on the green rustic bench at the farther end of the porch. It complained under them; there was talk and low giggling.

" We didn't expect to strike anything this

soon," Lambert said, his active mind leaping ahead to shape new romance like a magician.

"You don't look like the kind of boys that'd shy from a job if it jumped out in the road ahead of you."

"I'd hate for folks to think we would."

"Ain't you the feller they call the Duke of Chimney Butte?"

"They call me that in this country."

"Yes; I knew that horse the minute you rode up, though he's changed for the better wonderful since I saw him last, and I knew you from the descriptions I've heard of you. Vesta'd give you a job in a minute, and she'd pay you good money, too. I wouldn't wonder if she didn't put you in as foreman right on the jump, account of the name you've got up here in the Bad Lands."

"Not much to my credit in the name, I'm afraid," said Lambert, almost sadly. "Do they still cut her fences and run off her stock?"

"Yes; rustlin's got to be stylish around here ag'in, after we thought we had all them gangs rounded up and sent to the pen. I guess some of their time must be up and they're comin' home."

"It's pretty tough for a single-handed girl."

"Yes, it is tough. Them fellers are more than likely some of the old crowd Philbrook used to fight and round up and send over the road. He killed off four or five of them, and the rest of them swore they'd salt him when they'd done their time. Well, he's gone. But they're not above fightin' a girl."

"It's a tough job for a woman," said Lambert, looking thoughtfully toward the white house on the mesa.

"Ain't it, though?"

Lambert thought about it a while, or appeared to be thinking about it, sitting with bent head, smoking silently, looking now and then toward the ranchhouse, the lights of which could be seen. Alta came across the porch presently, Taterleg attending her like a courtier. She dismissed him at the door with an excuse of deferred duties within. He joined his thoughtful partner.

"Better go up and see her in the morning," suggested Wood, the landlord.

"I think I will, thank you."

Wood went in to sell a cowboy a cigar; the

partners started out to have a look at Glendora by moonlight. A little way they walked in silence, the light of the barber-shop falling across the road ahead of them.

"See who in the morning, Duke?" Taterleg inquired.

"Lady in the white house on the mesa. Her father died a few weeks ago, and left her alone with a big ranch on her hands. Rustlers are runnin' her cattle off, cuttin' her fences ——"

"Fences?"

"Yes, forty thousand acres all fenced in, like Texas."

"You don't tell me?"

"Needs men, Wood says. I thought maybe ——"

The Duke didn't finish it; just left it swinging that way, expecting Taterleg to read the rest.

"Sure," said Taterleg, taking it right along. "I wouldn't mind stayin' around here a while. Glendora's a nice little place; nicer place than I thought it was."

The Duke said nothing. But as they went on toward the barber-shop he grinned.

CHAPTER VII

THE HOMELIEST MAN

THAT brilliant beam falling through the barber's open door and uncurtained window came from a new lighting device, procured from a Chicago mail-order house. It was a gasoline lamp that burned with a gas mantle, swinging from the ceiling, flooding the little shop with a greenish light.

It gave a ghastly hue of death to the human face, but it would light up the creases and wrinkles of the most weathered neck that came under the barber's blade. That was the main consideration, for most of the barber's work was done by night, that trade — or profession, as those who pursue it unfailingly hold it to be — being a side line in connection with his duties as station agent. He was a progressive citizen, and no grass grew under his feet, no hair under his hand.

At the moment that the Duke and Taterleg

entered the barber's far-reaching beam, some buck of the range was stretched in the chair. The customer was a man of considerable length and many angles, a shorn appearance about his face, especially his big, bony nose, that seemed to tell of a mustache sacrificed in the operation just then drawing to a close.

Taterleg stopped short at sight of the long legs drawn up like a sharp gable to get all of them into the chair, the immense nose raking the ceiling like a double-barreled cannon, the morgue-tinted light giving him the complexion of a man ready for his shroud. He touched Lambert's arm to check him and call his attention.

"Look in there — look at that feller, Duke! There he is; there's the man I've been lookin' for ever since I was old enough to vote. I didn't believe there was any such a feller; but there he is!"

"What feller? Who is he?"

"The feller that's uglier than me. Dang his melts, there he is! I'm going to ask him for his picture, so I'll have the proof to show."

Taterleg was at an unaccountable pitch of

spirits. Adventure had taken hold of him like liquor. He made a start for the door as if to carry out his expressed intention in all earnestness. Lambert stopped him.

"He might not see the joke, Taterleg."

"He couldn't refuse a man a friendly turn like that, Duke. Look at him! What's that feller rubbin' on him, do you reckon?"

"Ointment of some kind, I guess."

Taterleg stood with his bow legs so wide apart that a barrel could have been pitched between them, watching the operation within the shop with the greatest enjoyment.

"Goose grease, with *pre*-fume in it that cuts your breath. Look at that feller shut his eyes and stretch his derned old neck! Just like a calf when you rub him under the chin. Look at him — did you ever see anything to match it?"

"Come on — let the man alone."

"Wrinkle remover, beauty restorer," said Taterleg, not moving forward an inch upon his way. While he seemed to be struck with admiration for the process of renovation, there was an unmistakable jeer in his tone which the barber resented by a fierce look.

"You're goin' to get into trouble if you don't shut up," Lambert cautioned.

"Look at him shut his old eyes and stretch his neck! Ain't it the sweetest ——"

The man in the chair lifted himself in sudden grimness, sat up from between the barber's massaging hands, which still held their pose like some sort of brace, turned a threatening look into the road. If half his face was sufficient to raise the declaration from Taterleg that the man was uglier than he, all of it surely proclaimed him the homeliest man in the nation. His eyes were red, as from some long carousal, their lids heavy and slow, his neck was long, and inflamed like an old gobbler's when he inflates himself with his impotent rage.

He looked hard at the two men, so sour in his wrath, so comical in his unmatched ugliness, that Lambert could not restrain a most unusual and generous grin. Taterleg bared his head, bowing low, not a smile, not a ripple of a smile, on his face.

"Mister, I take off my hat to you," he said.

"Yes, and I'll take your fool head off the first time I meet you!" the man returned. He

let himself back into the barber's waiting hands, a growl deep in him, surly as an old dog that has been roused out of his place in the middle of the road.

"General, I wouldn't hurt you for a purty, I wouldn't change your looks for a dollar bill," said Taterleg.

"Wait till I git out of this chair!" the customer threatened, voice smothered in the barber's hands.

"I guess he's not a dangerous man — lucky for you," said Lambert. He drew Taterleg away; they went on.

The allurements of Glendora were no more dazzling by night than by day. There was not much business in the saloon, there being few visitors in town, no roistering, no sounds of uncurbed gaiety. Formerly there had been a dance-hall in connection with the saloon, but that branch of the business had failed through lack of patronage long ago. The bar stood in the front of the long, cheerless room, a patch of light over and around it, the melancholy furniture of its prosperous days dim in the gloom beyond.

Lambert and Taterleg had a few drinks to show their respect for the institutions of the country, and went back to the hotel. Somebody had taken Taterleg's place beside Alta on the green bench. It was a man who spoke with rumbling voice like the sound of an empty wagon on a rocky road. Lambert recognized the intonation at once.

"It looks to me like there's trouble ahead for you, Mr. Wilson," he said.

"I'll take that feller by the handle on his face and bust him ag'in' a tree like a gourd," Taterleg said, not in boasting manner, but in the even and untroubled way of a man stating a fact.

"If there was any tree."

"I'll slam him ag'in' a rock; I'll bust him like a oyster."

"I think we'd better go to bed without a fight, if we can."

"I'm willin'; but I'm not goin' around by the back door to miss that feller."

They came up the porch into the light that fell weakly from the office down the steps. There was a movement of feet beside the green

bench, an exclamation, a swift advance on the part of the big-nosed man who had afforded amusement for Taterleg in the barber's chair.

"You little bench-leggid fiste, if you've got gall enough to say one word to a man's face, say it!" he challenged.

Alta came after him, quickly, with pacific intent. She was a tall girl, not very well filled out, like an immature bean pod. Her heavy black hair was cut in a waterfall of bangs which came down to her eyebrows, the rest of it done up behind in loops like sausages, and fastened with a large, red ribbon. She had put off her apron, and stood forth in white, her sleeves much shorter than the arms which reached out of them, rings on her fingers which looked as if they would leave their shadows behind.

"Now, Mr. Jedlick, I don't want you to go raisin' no fuss around here with the guests," she said.

"Jedlick!" repeated Taterleg, turning to Lambert with a pained, depressed look on his face. "It sounds like something you blow in to make a noise."

The barber's customer was a taller man standing than he was long lying. There wasn't much clearance between his head and the ceiling of the porch. He stood before Taterleg glowing, his hat off, his short-cut hair glistening with pomatum, showing his teeth like a vicious horse.

"You look like you was cut out with a can-opener," he sneered.

"Maybe I was, and I've got rough edges on me," Taterleg returned, looking up at him with calculative eye.

"Now, Mr. Jedlick"—a hand on his arm, but confident of the force of it, like a lady animal trainer in a cage of lions—"you come on over here and set down and leave that gentleman alone."

"If anybody but you'd 'a' said it, Alta, I'd 'a' told him he was a liar," Jedlick growled. He moved his foot to go with her, stopped, snarled at Taterleg again. "I used to roll 'em in flour and swaller 'em with the feathers on," said he.

"You're a terrible rough feller, ain't you?" Taterleg inquired with cutting sarcasm.

Alta led Jedlick off to his corner; Taterleg and Lambert entered the hotel office.

"Gee, but this is a windy night!" said the Duke, holding his hat on with both hands.

"I'll let some of the wind out of him if he monkeys with me!"

"Looks to me like I know another feller that an operation wouldn't hurt," the Duke remarked, turning a sly eye on his friend.

The landlord appeared with a lamp to light them to their beds, putting an end to these exchanges of threat and banter. As he was leaving them to their double-barreled apartment, Lambert remarked:

"That man Jedlick's an interesting-lookin' feller."

"Ben Jedlick? Yes, Ben's a case; he's quite a case."

"What business does he foller?"

"Ben? Ben's cook on Pat Sullivan's ranch up the river; one of the best camp cooks in the Bad Lands, and I guess the best known, without any doubt."

Taterleg sat down on the side of his bed as if he had been punctured, indeed, lopping forward

in mock attitude of utter collapse as the landlord closed the door.

"Cook! That settles it for me; I've turned the last flapjack I'll ever turn for any man but myself."

"How will you manage the oyster parlor?"

"Well, I've just about give up that notion, Duke. I've been thinkin' I'll stick to the range and go in the sheep business."

"I expect it would be a good move, old feller."

"They're goin' into it around here, they tell me."

"Alta tells you."

"Oh, you git out! But I'm a cowman right now, and I'm goin' to stay one for some little time to come. It don't take much intelligence in a man to ride fence."

"No; I guess we could both pass on that."

The Duke blew the lamp out with his hat. There was silence, all but the scuffing sound of disrobing. Taterleg spoke out of bed.

"That girl's got purty eyes, ain't she?"

"Lovely eyes, Taterleg."

"And purty hair, too. Makes a feller want

to lean over and pat that little row of bangs."

"I expect there's a feller down there doin' it now."

The spring complained under Taterleg's sudden movement; there was a sound of swishing legs under the sheet. Lambert saw him dimly against the window, sitting with his feet on the floor.

"You mean Jedlick?"

"Why not Jedlick? He's got the field to himself."

Taterleg sat a little while thinking about it. Presently he resumed his repose, chuckling a choppy little laugh.

"Jedlick! Jedlick ain't got no more show than a cow. When a lady steps in and takes a man's part there's only one answer, Duke. And she called me a gentleman, too. Didn't you hear her call me a gentleman, Duke?"

"I seem to remember that somebody else called you that one time."

Taterleg hadn't any reply at once. Lambert lay there grinning in the dark. No matter how sincere Taterleg might have been in this or any other affair, to the Duke it was only a joke.

That is the attitude of most men toward the tender vagaries of others. No romance ever is serious but one's own.

"Well, that happened a good while ago," said Taterleg defensively.

But memories didn't trouble him much that night. Very soon he was sleeping, snoring on the *G* string with unsparing pressure. For Lambert there was no sleep. He lay in a fever of anticipation. Tomorrow he should see her, his quest ended almost as soon as begun.

There was not one stick of fuel for the flame of this conjecture, not one reasonable justification for his more than hope. Only something had flashed to him that the girl in the house on the mesa was she whom his soul sought, whose handkerchief was folded in his pocketbook and carried with his money. He would take no counsel from reason, no denial from fate.

He lay awake seeing visions when he should have been asleep in the midst of legitimate dreams. A score of plans for serving her came up for examination, a hundred hopes for a happy culmination of this green romance budded, bloomed, and fell. But above the race

of his hot thoughts the certainty persisted that this girl was the lady of the beckoning hand.

He had no desire to escape from these fevered fancies in sleep, as his companion had put down his homely ambitions. Long he lay awake turning them to view from every hopeful, alluring angle, hearing the small noises of the town's small activities die away to silence and peace.

In the morning he should ride to see her, his quest happily ended, indeed, even on the threshold of its beginning.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HOUSE ON THE MESA

EVEN more bleak than from a distance the house on the mesa appeared as the riders approached it up the winding road. It stood solitary on its desert promontory, the bright sky behind it, not a shrub to ease its lines, not a barn or shed to make a rude background for its amazing proportions. Native grass grew sparsely on the great table where it stood; rains had guttered the soil near its door. There was about it the air of an abandoned place, its long, gaunt porches open to wind and storm.

As they drew nearer the house the scene opened in a more domestic appearance. Beyond it in a little cup of the mesa the stable, cattle sheds, and quarters for the men were located, so hidden in their shelter that they could not be seen from any point in the valley below. To the world that never scaled these crumbling heights, Philbrook's mansion appeared as if it

endured independent of those vulgar appendages indeed.

"Looks like they've got the barn where the house ought to be," said Taterleg. "I'll bet the wind takes the hide off of a feller up here in the wintertime."

"It's about as bleak a place for a house as a man could pick," Lambert agreed. He checked his horse a moment to look round on the vast sweep of country presented to view from the height, the river lying as bright as quicksilver in the dun land.

"Not even a wire fence to break it!" Taterleg drew his shoulders up and shivered in the hot morning sun as he contemplated the untrammeled roadway of the northern winds. "Well, sir, it looks to me like a cyclone carried that house from somewheres and slammed it down. No man in his right senses ever built it there."

"People take queer freaks sometimes, even in their senses. I guess we can ride right around to the door."

But for the wide, weathered porch they could have ridden up to it and knocked on its panels

from the saddle. Taterleg was for going to the kitchen door, a suggestion which the Duke scorned. He didn't want to meet that girl at a kitchen door, even her own kitchen door. For that he was about to meet her, there was no doubt in him that moment.

He was not in a state of trembling eagerness, but of calm expectation, as a man might be justified in who had made his preparations and felt the outcome sure. He even smiled as he pictured her surprise, like a man returning home unexpectedly, but to a welcome of which he held no doubt.

Taterleg remained mounted while Lambert went to the door. It was a rather inhospitable appearing door of solid oak, heavy and dark. There was a narrow pane of beveled glass set into it near the top, beneath it a knocker that must have been hammered by a hand in some far land centuries before the house on the mesa was planned.

A negro woman, rheumatic, old, came to the door. Miss Philbrook was at the barn, she said. What did they want of her? Were they looking for work? To these questions Lambert

made no reply. As he turned back to his horse the old serving woman came to the porch, leaving the door swinging wide, giving a view into the hall, which was furnished with a profusion and luxuriance that Taterleg never had seen before.

The old woman watched the Duke keenly as he swung into the saddle in the suppleness of his youthful grace. She shaded her eyes against the sun, looking after him still as he rode with his companion toward the barn.

Chickens were making the barnyard lots comfortable with their noise, some dairy cows of a breed alien to that range waited in a lot to be turned out to the day's grazing; a burro put its big-eared head round the corner of a shed, eying the strangers with the alert curiosity of a *niño* of his native land. But the lady of the ranch was not in sight nor sound.

Lambert drew up at the gate cutting the employees' quarters from the barnyard, and sat looking things over. Here was a peace and security, an atmosphere of contentment and comfort, entirely lacking in the surroundings of the house. The buildings were all of far better

class than were to be found on the ranches of that country; even the bunkhouse a house, in fact, and not a shed-roofed shack.

"I wonder where she's at?" said Taterleg, leaning and peering. "I don't see her around here nowheres."

"I'll go down to the bunkhouse and see if there's anybody around," Lambert said, for he had a notion, somehow, that he ought to meet her on foot.

Taterleg remained at the gate, because he looked better on a horse than off, and he was not wanting in that vain streak which any man with a backbone and marrow in him possesses. He wanted to appear at his best when the boss of that high-class outfit laid her eyes on him for the first time; and if he had hopes that she might succumb to his charms, they were no more extravagant than most men's are under similar conditions.

Off to one side of a long barn Lambert saw her as he opened the gate. She was trying to coax a young calf to drink out of a bucket that an old negro held under its nose. Perhaps his heart climbed a little, and his eyes grew hot

with a sudden surge of blood, after the way of youth, as he went forward.

He could not see her face fully, for she was bending over the calf, and the broad brim of her hat interposed. She looked up at the sound of his approach, a startled expression in her frank, gray eyes. Handsome, in truth, she was, in her riding habit of brown duck, her heavy sombrero, her strong, high boots. Her hair was the color of old honeycomb, her face browned by sun and wind.

She was a maid to gladden a man's heart, with the morning sun upon her, the strength of her great courage in her clear eyes; a girl of breeding, as one could see by her proud carriage.

But she was *not* the girl whose handkerchief he had won in his reckless race with the train!

CHAPTER IX

A KNIGHT-ERRANT

THE Duke took off his hat, standing before her foolishly dumb between his disappointment and embarrassment. He had counted so fully on finding the girl of his romance that he was reluctant to accept the testimony of his eyes. Here was one charming enough to compensate a man for a hundred fasts and fevers, but she was not the lodestone that had drawn upon his heart with that impelling force which could not be denied.

What a stupid blunder his impetuous conclusion had led him into; what an awkward situation! Pretty as she was, he didn't want to serve this woman, no matter for her embarrassments and distress. He could not remain there a week in the ferment of his longing to be on his way, searching the world for her whom his soul desired. This ran over him like an electric shock as he stood before her, hat in hand, head

bent a little, like a culprit, looking rather stupid in his confusion.

"Were you looking for somebody?" she asked, her handsome face sunning over with a smile that invited his confidence and dismissed his qualms.

"I was looking for the boss, ma'am."

"I'm the boss." She spoke encouragingly, as to some timid creature, bending to brush off the milk that the stubborn calf had shaken from its muzzle over her skirt.

"My partner and I are strangers here — he's over there at the gate — passing through the country, and wanted your permission to look around the place a little. They told us about it down at Glendora."

The animation of her face was clouded instantly as by a shadow of disappointment. She turned her head as if to hide this from his eyes, answering carelessly, a little pettishly:

"Go ahead; look around till you're tired."

Lambert hesitated, knowing very well that he had raised expectations which he was in no present mind to fill. She must be sorely in need of help when she would brighten up that way at

the mere sight of a common creature like a cow-puncher. He hated to take away what he had seemed to come there offering, what he had, in all earnestness, come to offer.

But she was not the girl. He had followed a false lure that his own unbridled imagination had lit. The only thing to do was back out of it as gracefully as he could, and the poor excuse of " looking around " was the best one he could lay his hand to in a hurry.

" Thank you," said he, rather emptily.

She did not reply, but bent again to her task of teaching the little black calf to take its breakfast out of the pail instead of the fashion in which nature intended it to refresh itself. Lambert backed off a little, for the way of the range had indeed become his way in that year of his apprenticeship, and its crudities were over him painfully. When off what he considered a respectful distance he put on his hat, turning a look at her as if to further assure her that his invasion of her premises was not a trespass.

She gave him no further notice, engrossed as she appeared to be with the calf, but when he reached the gate and looked back, he saw her

standing straight, the bucket at her feet, looking after him as if she resented the fact that two free-footed men should come there and flaunt their leisure before her in the hour of her need.

Taterleg was looking over the gate, trying to bring himself into the range of her eyes. He swept off his hat when she looked that way, to be rewarded by an immediate presentation of her back. Such cow-punchers as these were altogether too fine and grand in their independent airs, her attitude seemed to say.

"Did you take the job?" Taterleg inquired.

"I didn't ask her about it."

"You didn't ask her? Well, what in the name of snakes did you come up here for?"

The Duke led his horse away from the gate, back where she could not see him, and stood fiddling with his cinch a bit, although it required no attention at all.

"I got to thinkin' maybe I'd better go on west a piece. If you want to stay, don't let me lead you off. Go on over and strike her for a job; she needs men, I know, by the way she looked."

"No, I guess I'll go on with you till our roads

fork. But I was kind of thinkin' I'd like to stay around Glendora a while." Taterleg sighed as he seemed to relinquish the thought of it, tried the gate to see that it was latched, turned his horse about. "Well, where're we headin' for now?"

"I want to ride up there on that bench in front of the house and look around a little at the view; then I guess we'll go back to town."

They rode to the top of the bench the Duke indicated, where the view broadened in every direction, that being the last barrier between the river and the distant hills. The ranchhouse appeared big even in that setting of immensities, and perilously near the edge of the crumbling bluff which presented a face almost sheer on the river more than three hundred feet below.

"It must 'a' been a job to haul the lumber for that house up here."

That was Taterleg's only comment. The rugged grandeur of nature presented to him only its obstacles; its beauties did not move him any more than they would have affected a cow.

The Duke did not seem to hear him. He was

stretching his gaze into the dim south up the river, where leaden hills rolled billow upon billow, engarnitured with their sad gray sage. Whatever his thoughts were, they bound him in a spell which the creaking of Taterleg's saddle, as he shifted in it impatiently, did not disturb.

"Couple of fellers just rode up to the gate in the cross-fence back of the bunkhouse," Taterleg reported.

The Duke grunted, to let it be known that he heard, but was not interested. He was a thousand miles away from the Bad Lands in his fast-running dreams.

"That old nigger seems to be havin' some trouble with them fellers," came Taterleg's further report. "There goes that girl on her horse up to the gate — say, look at 'em, Duke! Them fellers is tryin' to make her let 'em through."

Lambert turned, indifferently, to see. There appeared to be a controversy under way at the gate, to be sure. But rows between employees and employer were common; that wasn't his fuss. Perhaps it wasn't an argument, as it seemed to be from that distance, anyhow.

"Did you see that?" Taterleg started his

horse forward in a jump as he spoke, reining up stiffly at Lambert's side. "One of them fellers pulled his gun on that old nigger — did you see him, Duke?"

"Ye-es, I saw him," said the Duke speculatively, watching the squabble at the distant gate keenly, turning his horse to head that way by a pressure of his knee.

"Knocked him flat!" Taterleg set off in a gallop as he spoke, the Duke tight after him, soon ahead of him, old Whetstone a yellow streak across the mesa.

It wasn't his quarrel, but nobody could come flashing a gun in the face of a lady when he was around. That was the argument that rose in the Duke's thoughts as he rode down the slope and up the fenced passage between the barns.

The gate at which the two horsemen were disputing the way with the girl and her old black helper was a hundred yards or more beyond the one at which Taterleg and the Duke had stopped a little while before. It was in a cross-fence which appeared to cut the house and other buildings from the range beyond.

As the Duke bent to open this first gate he

saw that the girl had dismounted and was bending over the old negro, who was lying stretched on the ground. He had fallen against the gate, on which one of the ruffians was now pushing, trying to open it against the weight of his body. The girl spoke sharply to the fellow, bracing her shoulder against the gate. Lambert heard the scoundrel laugh as he swung to the ground and set his shoulder against the other side.

The man who remained mounted leaned over and added his strength to the struggle, together forcing the gate open, pushing the resisting girl with it, dragging the old negro, who clutched the bottom plank and was hauled brutally along. All concerned in the struggle were so deeply engrossed in their own affair that none noted the approach of the Duke and Taterleg. The fellow on the ground was leading his horse through as Lambert galloped up.

At the sound of Lambert's approach the dismounted man leaped into his saddle. The two trespassers sat scowling inside the gate, watching him closely for the first hostile sign. Vesta Philbrook was trying to help the old negro to his feet. Blood was streaming down his face

from a cut on his forehead; he sank down again when she let go of him to welcome this unexpected help.

"These men cut my fence; they're trespassing on me, trying to defy and humiliate me because they know I'm alone!" she said. She stretched out her hand toward Lambert as if in appeal to a judge, her face flushed from the struggle and sense of outrage, her hat pushed back on her amber hair, the fire of righteous anger in her eyes. The realization of her beauty seemed to sweep Lambert like a flood of sudden music, lifting his heart in a great surge, making him recklessly glad.

"Where do you fellers think you're goin'?" he asked, following the speech of the range.

"We're goin' where we started to go," the man who had just remounted replied, glaring at Lambert with insulting sneer.

This was a stocky man with bushy red-gray eyebrows, a stubble of roan beard over his blunt, common face. One foot was short in his boot, as if he had lost his toes in a blizzard, a mark not uncommonly set by unfriendly nature on the men who defied its force in that country.

He wore a duck shooting-jacket, the pockets of it bulging as if with game.

His companion was a much younger man, slender, graceful in the saddle, rather handsome in a swarthy, defiant way. He ranged up beside the spokesman as if to take full share in whatever was to come. Both of them were armed with revolvers, the elder of the two with a rifle in addition, which he carried in a leather scabbard black and slick with age, slung on his saddle under his thigh.

"You'll have to get permission from this lady before you go through here," Lambert told him calmly.

Vesta Philbrook had stepped back, as if she had presented her case and waited adjudication. She stood by the old negro where he sat in the dust, her hand on his head, not a word more to add to her case, seeming to have passed it on to this slim, confident, soft-spoken stranger with his clear eyes and steady hand, who took hold of it so competently.

"I've been cuttin' this purty little fence for ten years, and I'll keep on cuttin' it and goin' through whenever I feel like it. I don't have to

git no woman's permission, and no man's, neither, to go where I want to go, kid."

The man dropped his hand to his revolver as he spoke the last word with a twisting of the lip, a showing of his scorbutic teeth, a sneer that was at once an insult and a goad. The next moment he was straining his arms above his head as if trying to pull them out of their sockets, and his companion was displaying himself in like manner, Lambert's gun down on them, Taterleg coming in deliberately a second or two behind.

"Keep them right there," was the Duke's caution, jerking his head to Taterleg in the manner of a signal understood.

Taterleg rode up to the fence-cutters and disarmed them, holding his gun comfortably in their ribs as he worked with swift hand. The rifle he handed down to the old negro, who was now on his feet, and who took it with a bow and a grave face across which a gleam of satisfaction flashed. The holsters with the revolvers in them he passed to the Duke, who hung them on his saddle-horn.

"Pile off," Taterleg ordered.

They obeyed, wrathful but impotent. Taterleg sat by, chewing gum, calm and steady as if the thing had been rehearsed a hundred times. The Duke pointed to the old negro's hat.

"Pick it up," he ordered the younger man; "dust it off and give it to him."

The fellow did as directed, with evil face, for it hurt his high pride, just as the Duke intended that it should hurt. Lambert nodded to the man who had knocked the old fellow down with a blow of his heavy revolver.

"Dust off his clothes," he said.

Vesta Philbrook smiled as she witnessed this swift humbling of her ancient enemy. The old negro turned himself arrogantly, presenting the rear of his broad and dusty pantaloons; but the bristling, red-faced rancher balked. He looked up at Lambert, half choked on the bone of his rage.

"I'll die before I'll do it!" he declared with a curse.

Lambert beat down the defiant, red-balled glowering eyes with one brief, straight look. The fence-cutter broke a tip of sage and set to work, the old man lifting his arms like a strut-

ting gobbler, his head held high, the pain of his hurt forgotten in the triumphant moment of his revenge.

"Have you got some wire and tools around here handy, Miss Philbrook?" Lambert inquired. "These men are going to do a little fence fixin' this morning for a change."

The old negro pranced off to get the required tools, throwing a look back at the two prisoners now and then, covering his mouth with his hand to keep back the explosion of his mirth. Badly as he was hurt, his enjoyment of this unprecedented situation seemed to cure him completely. His mistress went after him, doubtful of his strength, with nothing but a quick look into Lambert's eyes as she passed to tell him how deeply she felt.

It was a remarkable procession for the Bad Lands that set out from the cross-line fence a few minutes later, the two free rangers starting under escort to repair the damage done to a despised fence-man's barrier. One of them carried a wire-stretcher, the chain of it wound round his saddle-horn, the other a coil of barbed wire and such tools as were required. After

they had proceeded a little way, Taterleg thought of something.

"Don't you reckon we might need a couple of posts, Duke? " he asked.

The Duke thought perhaps they might come in handy. They turned back, accordingly, and each of the trespassers was compelled to shoulder an oak post, with much blasphemy and threatening of future adjustment. In that manner of marching, each free ranger carrying his cross as none of his kind ever had carried it before, they rode to the scene of their late depredations.

Vesta Philbrook stood at the gate and watched them go, reproaching herself for her silence in the presence of this man who had come to her assistance with such sure and determined hand. She never had found it difficult before to thank anybody who had done her a generous turn; but here her tongue had lain as still as a hare in its covert, and her heart had gone trembling in the gratitude which it could not voice.

A strong man he was, and full of commanding courage, but neither so strong nor so mighty

that she had need to keep as quiet in his presence as a kitchen maid before a king. But he would have to pass that way coming back, and she could make amends. The old negro stood by, chuckling his pleasure at the sight drawing away into the distance of the pasture where his mistress' cattle fed.

"Ananias, do you know who that man is," she asked.

" Laws, Miss Vesta, co'se I do. Didn't you hear his hoss-wrangler call him Duke? "

" I heard him call him Duke."

" He's that man they call Duke of Chimley Butte — I know that hoss he's a-ridin'; that hoss used to be Jim Wilder's ole outlaw. That Duke man killed Jim and took that hoss away from him; that's what he done. That was while you was gone; you didn't hear 'bout it."

" Killed him and took his horse? Surely, he must have had some good reason, Ananias."

" I don' know, and I ain't a-carin'. That's him, and that's what he done."

" Did you ever hear of him killing anybody else? "

" Oh, plenty, plenty," said the old man with

easy generosity. "I bet he's killed a hun'ed men — maybe mo'n a hun'ed."

"But you don't know," she said, smiling at the old man's extravagant recommendation of his hero.

"I don' know, but I bet he is," said he. "Look at 'em!" he chuckled; "look at old Nick Ha'gus and his onery, low-down Injun-blood boy!"

CHAPTER X

GUESTS OF THE BOSS LADY

VESTA rode out to meet them as they were coming back, to make sure of her thanks. She was radiant with gratitude, and at no loss any longer for words to express it. Before they had ridden together on the return journey half a mile, Taterleg felt that he had known her all her life, and was ready to cast his fortunes with her, win or lose.

Lambert was leaving the conversation between her and Taterleg, for the greater part. He rode in gloomy isolation, like a man with something on his mind, speaking only when spoken to, and then as shortly as politeness would permit. Taterleg, who had words enough for a book, appeared to feel the responsibility of holding them up to the level of gentlemen and citizens of the world. Not if talk could prevent it would Taterleg allow them to be classed as a pair of boors who could not go beyond the

ordinary cow-puncher's range in word and thought.

"It'll be some time, ma'am, before that feller Hargus and his boy'll try to make a short cut to Glendora through your ranch ag'in," said he.

"It was the first time they were ever caught, after old man Hargus had been cutting our fence for years, Mr. Wilson. I can't tell you how much I owe you for humiliating them where they thought the humiliation would be on my side."

"Don't you mention it, ma'am; it's the greatest pleasure in the world."

"He thought he'd come by the house and look in the window and defy me because I was alone."

"He's got a mean eye; he's got a eye like a wolf."

"He's got a wolf's habits, too, in more ways than one, Mr. Wilson."

"Yes, that man'd steal calves, all right."

"We've never been able to prove it on him, Mr. Wilson, but you've put your finger on Mr. Hargus' weakness like a phrenologist."

Taterleg felt his oats at this compliment. He sat up like a major, his chest out, his mustache as big on his thin face as a Mameluke's. It always made Lambert think of the handlebars on that long-horn safety bicycle that he came riding into the Bad Lands.

"The worst part of it is, Mr. Wilson, that he's not the only one."

"Neighbors livin' off of you, are they? Yes, that's the way it was down in Texas when the big ranches begun to fence, they tell me — I never was there, ma'am, and I don't know of my own knowledge and belief, as the lawyers say. Fence-ridin' down there in them days was a job where a man took his life in both hands and held it up to be shot at."

"There's been an endless fight on this ranch, too. It's been a strain and a struggle from the first day, not worth it, not worth half of it. But father put the best years of his life into it, and established it where men boasted it couldn't be done. I'm not going to let them whip me now."

Lambert looked at her with a quick gleam of admiration in his eyes. She was riding between him and Taterleg, as easy in their company,

and as natural as if she had known them for years. There had been no heights of false pride or consequence for her to descend to the comradeship of these men, for she was as unaffected and ingenuous as they. Lambert seemed to wake to a sudden realization of this. His interest in her began to grow, his reserve to fall away.

"They told us at Glendora that rustlers were running your cattle off," said he. "Are they taking the stragglers that get through where the fence is cut, or coming after them?"

"They're coming in and running them off almost under our eyes. I've only got one man on the ranch beside Ananias; nobody riding fence at all but myself. It takes me a good while to ride nearly seventy miles of fence."

"Yes, that's so," Lambert seemed to reflect. "How many head have you got in this pasture?"

"I ought to have about four thousand, but they're melting away like snow, Mr. Lambert."

"We saw a bunch of 'em up there where them fellers cut the fence," Taterleg put in, not to be left out of the game which he had

started and kept going single-handed so long; "white-faced cattle, like they've got in Kansas."

"Ours — mine are all white-faced. They stand this climate better than any other."

"It must have been a bunch of strays we saw — none of them was branded," Lambert said.

"Father never would brand his calves, for various reasons, the humane above all others. I never blamed him after seeing it done once, and I'm not going to take up the barbarous practice now. All other considerations aside, it ruins a hide, you know, Mr. Lambert."

"It seems to me you'd better lose the hide than the calf, Miss Philbrook."

"It does make it easy for thieves, and that's the only argument in favor of branding. While we've — I've got the only white-faced herd in this country, I can't go into court and prove my property without a brand, once the cattle are run outside of this fence. So they come in and take them, knowing they're safe unless they're caught."

Lambert fell silent again. The ranchhouse

was in sight, high on its peninsula of prairie, like a lighthouse seen from sea.

"It's a shame to let that fine herd waste away like that," he said, ruminatively, as if speaking to himself.

"It's always been hard to get help here; cowboys seem to think it's a disgrace to ride fence. Such as we've been able to get nearly always turned out thieves on their own account in the end. The one out with the cattle now is a farm boy from Iowa, afraid of his shadow."

"They didn't want no fence in here in the first place — that's what set their teeth ag'in' you," Taterleg said.

"If I could only get some real men once," she sighed; "men who could handle them like you boys did this morning. Even father never seemed to understand where to take hold of them to hurt them, the way you do."

They were near the house now. Lambert rode on a little way in silence. Then:

"It's a shame to let that herd go to pieces," he said.

"It's a sin!" Taterleg declared.

She dropped her reins, looking from one to

the other, an eager appeal in her hopeful face.

"Why can't you boys stop here a while and help me out?" she asked, saying at last in a burst of hopeful eagerness what had been in her heart to say from the first. She held out her hand to each of them in a pretty way of appeal, turning from one to the other, her gray eyes pleading.

"I hate to see a herd like that broken up by thieves, and all of your investment wasted," said the Duke, thoughtfully, as if considering it deeply.

"It's a sin *and* a shame!" said Taterleg.

"I guess we'll stay and give you a hand," said the Duke.

She pulled her horse up short, and gave him, not a figurative hand, but a warm, a soft and material one, from which she pulled her buckskin glove as if to level all thought or suggestion of a barrier between them. She turned then and shook hands with Taterleg, warming him so with her glowing eyes that he patted her hand a little before he let it go, in manner truly patriarchal.

"You're all right, you're *all* right," he said.

Once pledged to it, the Duke was anxious to set his hand to the work that he saw cut out for him on that big ranch. He was like a physician who had entered reluctantly into a case after other practitioners had left the patient in desperate condition. Every moment must be employed if disaster to that valuable herd was to be averted.

Vesta would hear of nothing but that they come first to the house for dinner. So the guests did the best they could at improving their appearance at the bunkhouse after turning their horses over to the obsequious Ananias, who appeared with a large bandage, and a strong smell of turpentine, on his bruised head.

Beyond brushing off the dust of the morning's ride there was little to be done. Taterleg brought out his brightest necktie from the portable possessions rolled up in his slicker; the Duke produced his calfskin vest. There was not a coat between them to save the dignity of their profession at the boss lady's board. Taterleg's green-velvet waistcoat had suffered damage during the winter when a spark from his pipe burned a hole in it as big as a dollar. He held

it up and looked at it, concluding in the end that it would not serve.

With his hairy chaps off, Taterleg did not appear so bow-legged, but he waddled like a crab as they went toward the house to join the companion of their ride. The Duke stopped on the high ground near the house, turned, looked off over the great pasture that had been Philbrook's battle ground for so many years.

"One farmer from Iowa out there to watch four thousand cattle, and thieves all around him! Eatin' looks like burnin' daylight to me."

"She'd 'a' felt hurt if we'd 'a' shied off from her dinner, Duke. You know a man's got to eat when he ain't hungry and drink when he ain't dry sometimes in this world to keep up appearances."

"Appearances!" The Duke looked him over with humorous eye, from his somewhat clean sombrero to his capacious corduroy trousers gathered into his boot tops. "Oh, well, I guess it's all right."

Vesta was in excellent spirits, due to the broadening of her prospects, which had appeared so narrow and unpromising but a few

hours before. One of this pair, she believed, was worth three ordinary men. She asked them about their adventures, and the Duke solemnly assured her that they never had experienced any.

Taterleg, loquacious as he might be on occasion, knew when to hold his tongue. Lambert led her away from that ground into a discussion of her own affairs, and conditions as they stood between her neighbors and herself.

"Nick Hargus is one of the most persistent offenders, and we might as well dispose of him first, since you've met the old wretch and know what he's like on the outside," she explained. "Hargus was in the cattle business in a hand-to-mouth way when we came here, and he raised a bigger noise than anybody else about our fences, claiming we'd cut him off from water, which wasn't true. We didn't cut anybody off from the river.

"Hargus is married to an Indian squaw, a little old squat, black-faced thing as mean as a snake. They've got a big brood of children, that boy you saw this morning is the senior of the gang. Old Hargus usually harbors two or three cattle thieves, horse thieves or other

crooks of that kind, some of them just out of the pen, some preparing their way to it. He does a sort of general rustling business, with this ranch as his main source of supply. We've had a standing fight on with him ever since we came here, but today was the first time, as I told you, that he ever was caught.

"You heard what he said about cutting the fence this morning. That's the attitude of the country all around. You couldn't convict a man for cutting a fence in this country. So all a person can do is shoot them if you catch them at it. I don't know what Hargus will do to get even with this morning's humiliation."

"I think he'll leave that fence alone like it was charged with lightnin'," Taterleg said.

"He'll try to turn something; he's wily and vindictive."

"He needs a chunk of lead about the middle of his appetite," Taterleg declared.

"Who comes next?" Lambert inquired.

"There's a man they call Walleye Bostian — his regular name is Jesse — on the farther end of this place that's troubled with a case of incurable resentment against a barbed-wire fence.

He's a sheepman, one of the last that would do a lawless deed, you'd think, from the look of him, but he's mean to the roots of his hair."

"All sheepmen's onery, ma'am, they tell me," said Taterleg, a cowman now from core to rind, and loyal to his calling accordingly.

"I don't know about the rest of them, but Walleye Bostian is a mighty mean sheepman. Well, I know I got a shot at him once that he'll remember."

"*You* did?" Taterleg's face was as bright as a dishpan with admiration. He chuckled in his throat, eying the Duke slantingly to see how he took that piece of news.

The Duke sat up a little stiffer, his face grew a shade more serious, and that was all the change in him that Taterleg could see.

"I hope we can take that kind of work off your hands in the future, Miss Philbrook," he said, his voice slow and grave.

She lifted her grateful eyes with a look of appreciation that seemed to him overpayment for a service proposed, rather than done. She went on, then, with a description of her interesting neighbors.

"This ranch is a long, narrow strip, only about three miles wide by twenty deep, the river at this end of it, Walleye Bostian at the other. Along the sides there are various kinds of reptiles in human skin, none of them living within four or five miles of our fences, the average being much farther than that, for people are not very plentiful right around here.

"On the north of us Hargus is the worst, on the south a man named Kerr. Kerr is the biggest single-handed cattleman around here. His one grievance against us is that we shut a creek that he formerly used along inside our fences that forced him to range down to the river for water. As the creek begins and ends on our land — it empties into the river about a mile above here — it's hard for an unbiased mind to grasp Kerr's point of objection."

"Have you ever taken a shot at him?" the Duke asked, smiling a little dry smile.

"No-o," said she reflectively, "not at Kerr himself. Kerr is what is usually termed a gentleman; that is, he's a man of education and wears his beard cut like a banker's, but his methods of carrying on a feud are extremely

low. Fighting is beneath his dignity, I guess; he hires it done."

"You've seen some fightin' in your time, ma'am," Taterleg said.

"Too much of it," she sighed wearily. "I've had a shot at his men more than once, but there are one or two in that Kerr family I'd like to sling a gun down on!"

It was strange to hear that gentle-mannered, refined girl talk of fighting as if it were the commonest of everyday business. There was no note of boasting, no color of exaggeration in her manner. She was as natural and sincere as the calm breeze, coming in through the open window, and as wholesome and pure. There was not a doubt of that in the mind of either of the men at the table with her. Their admiration spoke out of their eyes.

"When you've had to fight all your life," she said, looking up earnestly into Lambert's face, "it makes you old before your time, and quick-tempered and savage, I suppose, even when you fight in self-defense. I used to ride fence when I was fourteen, with a rifle across my saddle, and I wouldn't have thought any more of shoot-

ing a man I saw cutting our fence or running off our cattle than I would a rabbit."

She did not say what her state of mind on that question was at present, but it was so plainly expressed in her flushed cheeks and defiant eyes that it needed no words.

"If you'd 'a' had your gun on you this morning when them fellers knocked that old coon down I bet there'd 'a' been a funeral due over at old Hargus' ranch," said Taterleg.

"I'd saddled up to go to the post office; I never carry a gun with me when I go to Glendora," she said.

"A country where a lady has to carry a gun at all ain't no country to speak of. It needs cleanin' up, ma'am, that's what it needs."

"It surely does, Mr. Wilson: you've got it sized up just right."

"Well, Taterleg, I guess we'd better be hittin' the breeze," the Duke suggested, plainly uneasy between the duty of courtesy and the long lines of unguarded fence.

Taterleg could not accustom himself to that extraordinary bunkhouse when they returned to it, on such short time He walked about in

it, necktie in his hand, looking into its wonders, marveling over its conveniences.

"It's just like a regular human house," said he.

There was a bureau with a glass to it in every room, and there were rooms for several men. The Duke and Taterleg stowed away their slender belongings in the drawers and soon were ready for the saddle. As he put the calf-skin vest away, the Duke took out the little handkerchief, from which the perfume of faint violet had faded long ago, and pressed it tenderly against his cheek.

"You'll wait on me a little while longer, won't you?" he asked.

Then he laid it away between the folds of his remarkable garment very carefully, and went out, his slicker across his arm, to take up his life in that strip of contention and strife between Vesta Philbrook's far-reaching wire fences.

CHAPTER XI

ALARMS AND EXCURSIONS

THE news quickly ran over the country that Vesta Philbrook had hired the notorious Duke of Chimney Butte and his gun-slinging side partner to ride fence. What had happened to Nick Hargus and his boy, Tom, seemed to prove that they were men of the old school, quite a different type from any who had been employed on that ranch previously.

Lambert was troubled to learn that his notoriety had run ahead of him, increasing as it spread. It was said that his encounter with Jim Wilder was only one of his milder exploits; that he was a grim and bloody man from Oklahoma who had marked his miles with tombstones as he traveled.

His first business on taking charge of the Philbrook ranch had been to do a piece of fence-cutting on his own account opposite Nick Hargus' ranch, through which he had ridden and

driven home thirty head of cattle lately stolen by that enterprising citizen from Vesta Philbrook's herd. This act of open-handed restoration, carried out in broad daylight alone, and in the face of Hargus, his large family of sons, and the skulking refugees from the law who chanced to be hiding there at the time, added greatly to the Duke's fame.

It did not serve as a recommendation among the neighbors who had preyed so long and notoriously on the Philbrook herd, and no doubt nothing would have been said about it by Hargus to even the most intimate of his ruffianly associates. But Taterleg and old Ananias took great pains to spread the story in Glendora, where it passed along, with additions as it moved. Hargus explained that the cattle were strays which had broken out.

While this reputation of the Duke was highly gratifying to Taterleg, who found his own glory increased thereby, it was extremely distasteful to Lambert, who had no means of preventing its spread or opportunity of correcting its falsity. He knew himself to be an inoffensive, rather backward and timid man, or at least this was

his own measure of himself. That fight with Jim Wilder always had been a cloud over his spirits, although his conscience was clear. It had sobered him and made him feel old, as Vesta Philbrook had said fighting made a person feel. He could understand her better, perhaps, than one whom violence had passed undisturbed.

There was nothing farther from his desire than strife and turmoil, gun-slinging and a fearful notoriety. But there he was, set up against his will, against his record, as a man to whom it was wise to give the road. That was a dangerous distinction, as he well understood, for a time would come, even opportunities would be created, when he would be called upon to defend it. That was the discomfort of a fighting name. It was a continual liability, bound sooner or later to draw upon a man to the full extent of his resources.

This reputation lost nothing in the result of his first meeting with Berry Kerr, the rancher who wore his beard like a banker and passed for a gentleman in that country, where a gentleman was defined, at that time, as a man who didn't

swear. This meeting took place on the south line of the fence on a day when Lambert had been on the ranch a little more than a week.

Kerr was out looking for strays, he said, although he seemed to overlook the joke that he made in neglecting to state from whose herd. Lambert gave him the benefit of the doubt and construed him to mean his own. He rode up to the fence, affable as a man who never had an evil intention in his life, and made inquiry concerning Lambert's connection with the ranch, making a pretense of not having heard that Vesta had hired new men.

"Well, she needs a couple of good men that will stand by her steady," he said, with all the generosity of one who had her interests close to his heart. "She's a good girl, and she's been havin' a hard time of it. But if you want to do her the biggest favor that a man ever did do under circumstances of similar nature, persuade her to tear this fence out, all around, and throw the range open like it used to be. Then all this fool quarreling and shooting will stop, and everybody in here will be on good terms again. That's the best way out of it for her,

and it will be the best way out of it for you if you intend to stay here and run this ranch."

While Kerr's manner seemed to be patriarchal and kindly advisory, there was a certain hardness beneath his words, a certain coldness in his eyes which made his proposal nothing short of a threat. It made all the resentful indignation which Lambert had mastered and chained down in himself rise up and bristle. He took it as a personal affront, as a threat against his own safety, and the answer that he gave to it was quick and to the point.

"There'll never be a yard of this fence torn down on my advice, Mr. Kerr," he said. "You people around here will have to learn to give it a good deal more respect from now on than you have in the past. I'm going to teach this crowd around here to take off their hats when they come to a fence."

Kerr was a slender, dry man, the native meanness of his crafty face largely masked by his beard, which was beginning to show streaks of gray in its brown. He was wearing a coat that day, although it was hot, and had no weapon in sight. He sat looking Lambert

straight in the eyes for a moment upon the delivery of this bill of intentions, his brows drawn a bit, a cast of concentrated hardness in his gray-blue eyes.

"I'm afraid you've bit off more than you can chew, much less swallow, young man," he said. With that he rode away, knowing that he had failed in what he probably had some hope of accomplishing in his sly and unworthy way.

Things went along quietly after that for a few weeks. Hargus did not attempt any retaliatory move; on the side of Kerr's ranch all was quiet. The Iowa boy, under Taterleg's tutelage, was developing into a trustworthy and capable hand, the cattle were fattening in the grassy valleys. All counted, it was the most peaceful spell that Philbrook's ranch ever had known, and the tranquility was reflected in the owner, and her house, and all within its walls.

Lambert did not see much of Vesta in those first weeks of his employment, for he lived afield, close beside the fences which he guarded as his own honor. Taterleg had a great pride in the matter also. He cruised up and down his section with a long-range rifle across his saddle,

putting in more hours sometimes, he said, than there were in a day. Taterleg knew very well that slinking eyes were watching him from the covert of the sage-gray hills. Unceasing vigilance was the price of reputation in that place, and Taterleg was jealous of his.

Lambert was beginning to grow restless under the urge of his spirit to continue his journey westward in quest of the girl who had left her favor in his hand. The romance of it, the improbability of ever finding her along the thousand miles between him and the sea, among the multitudes of women in the cities and hamlets along the way, appealed to him with a compelling lure.

He had considered many schemes for getting trace of her, among the most favored being that of finding the brakeman who stood on the end of the train that day among those who watched him ride and overtake it, and learning from him to what point her ticket read. That was the simplest plan. But he knew that conductors and brakemen changed every few hundred miles, and that this plan might not lead to anything in the end. But it was too simple to put

by without trying; when he set c this would be his first care.

He smiled sometimes as he ro nely beat inside the fence and recalled t that had animated him with the certaint Vesta Philbrook would turn out to be *the* s girl. The disappointment had been so l hat he had almost disliked Vesta that fir She was a fine girl, modest and unaff honest as the middle of the day, but there no appeal but the appeal of the weak to strong from her to him. They were drawn a common sympathy of determination; he h paused there to help her because she was o matched, fighting a brave battle against unscrupulous forces. He was taking pay from her, and there could not be admitted any thought of romance under such conditions.

But the girl whose challenge he had accepted at Misery that day was to be considered in a different light. There was a pledge between them, a bond. He believed that she was expecting him out there somewhere, waiting for him to come. Often he would halt on a hilltop and look away into the west, playing with a thou-

sand fancies as to whom she might be, and where.

He was riding in one of these dreams one mid-afternoon of a hot day about six weeks after taking charge of affairs on the ranch, thinking that he would tell Vesta in a day or two that he must go. Taterleg might stay with her, other men could be hired if she would look about her. He wanted to get out of the business anyway; there was no offering for a man in it without capital. So he was thinking, his head bent, as he rode up a long slope of grassy hill. At the top he stopped to blow old Whetstone a little, turning in the saddle, running his eyes casually along the fence.

He started, his dreams gone from him like a covey of frightened quail. The fence was cut. For a hundred yards or more along the hilltop it was cut at every post, making it impossible to piece.

Lambert could not have felt his resentment burn any hotter if it had been his own fence. It was a fence under his charge; the defiance was directed at him. He rode along to see if any cattle had escaped, and drew his breath

again with relief when he found that none had passed.

There was the track of but one horse; the fence-cutter had been alone, probably not more than an hour ahead of him. The job finished, he had gone boldly in the direction of Kerr's ranch, on whose side the depredation had been committed. Lambert followed the trail some distance. It led on toward Kerr's ranch, defiance in its very boldness. Kerr himself must have done that job.

One man had little chance of stopping such assaults, now they had begun, on a front of twenty miles. But Lambert vowed that if he ever did have the good fortune to come up on one of these sneaks while he was at work, he'd fill his hide so full of lead they'd have to get a derrick to load him into a wagon.

It didn't matter so much about the fence, so long as they didn't get any of the stock. But stragglers from the main herd would find a big gap like that in a few hours, and the rustlers lying in wait would hurry them away. One such loss as that and he would be a disgraced man in the eyes of Vesta Philbrook, and the laughing-

stock of the rascals who put it through. He rode in search of the Iowa boy who was with the cattle, his job being to ride among them continually to keep them accustomed to a man on horseback. Luckily he found him before sundown and sent him for wire. Then he stood guard at the cut until the damage was repaired.

After that fence-cutting became a regular prank on Kerr's side of the ranch. Watch as he might, Lambert could not prevent the stealthy excursions, the vindictive destruction of the hated barrier. All these breaches were made within a mile on either side of the first cut, sometimes in a single place, again along a stretch, as if the person using the nippers knew when to deliberate and when to hasten.

Always there was the trace of but one rider, who never dismounted to cut even the bottom wire. That it was the work of the same person each time Lambert was convinced, for he always rode the same horse, as betrayed by a broken hind hoof.

Lambert tried various expedients for trapping this skulker during a period of two weeks. He lay in wait by day and made stealthy excur-

sions by night, all to no avail. Whoever was doing it had some way of keeping informed on his movements with exasperating closeness.

The matter of discovering and punishing the culprit devolved on Lambert alone. He could not withdraw Taterleg to help him; the other man could not be spared from the cattle. And now came the crowning insult of all.

It was early morning, after an all-night watch along the three miles of fence where the wire-cutter always worked, when Lambert rode to the top of the ridge where the first breach in his line had been made. Below that point, not more than half a mile, he had stopped to boil his breakfast coffee. His first discovery on mounting the ridge was a panel of fence cut, his next a piece of white paper twisted to the end of one of the curling wires.

This he disengaged and unfolded. It was a page torn from a medicine memorandum book such as cow-punchers usually carry their time in, and the addresses of friends.

Why don't you come and get me, Mr. Duke?

This was the message it bore.

The writing was better, the spelling more exact than the output of the ordinary cow-puncher. Kerr himself, Lambert thought again. He stood with the taunting message in his fingers, looking toward the Kerr ranchhouse, some seven or eight miles to the south, and stood so quite a while, his eyes drawn small as if he looked into the wind.

"All right; I'll take you up on that," he said.

He rode slowly out through the gap, following the fresh trail. As before, it was made by the horse with the notch in its left hind hoof. It led to a hill three-quarters of a mile beyond the fence. From this point it struck a line for the distant ranchhouse.

Lambert did not go beyond the hill. Dismounting, he stood surveying the country about him, struck for the first time by the view that this vantage-point afforded of the domain under his care. Especially the line of fence was plainly marked for a long distance on either side of the little ridge where the last cut had been made. Evidently the skulker concealed himself at this very point and watched his open-

ing, playing entirely safe. That accounted for all the cutting having been done by daylight, as he was sure had been the case.

He looked about for trace of where the fellow had lain behind the fringe of sage, but the ground was so hard that it would not take a human footprint. As he looked he formulated a plan of his own. Half a mile or more beyond this hill, in the direction of the Kerr place, a small butte stood, its steep sides grassless, its flat top bare. That would be his watchtower from that day forward until he had his hand on this defiant rascal who had time, in his security, to stop and write a note.

That night he scaled the little butte after mending the fence behind him, leaving his horse concealed among the huge blocks of rock at its foot. Next day, and the one following, he passed in the blazing sun, but nobody came to cut the fence. At night he went down, rode his horse to water, turned him to graze, and went back to his perch among the ants and lizards on top of the butte.

The third day was cloudy and uneventful; on the fourth, a little before nine, just when the

sun was squaring off to shrivel him in his skin, Lambert saw somebody coming from the direction of Kerr's ranch.

The rider made straight for the hill below Lambert's butte, where he reined up before reaching the top, dismounted and went crawling to the fringe of sage at the farther rim of the bare summit. Lambert waited until the fellow mounted and rode toward the fence, then he slid down the shale, starting Whetstone from his doze.

Lambert calculated that he was more than a mile from the fence. He wanted to get over there near enough to catch the fellow at work, so there would be full justification for what he intended to do.

Whetstone stretched himself to the task, coming out of the broken ground and up the hill from which the fence-cutter had ridden but a few minutes before while the marauder was still a considerable distance from his objective. The man was riding slowly, as if saving his horse for a chance surprise.

Lambert cut down the distance between them rapidly, and was not more than three hundred

yards behind when the fellow began snipping the wire with a pair of nippers that glittered in the sun.

Lambert held his horse back, approaching with little noise. The fence-cutter was rising back to the saddle after cutting the bottom wire of the second panel when he saw that he was trapped.

Plainly unnerved by this *coup* of the despised fence-guard, he sat clutching his reins as if calculating his chance of dashing past the man who blocked his retreat. Lambert slowed down, not more than fifty yards between them, waiting for the first move toward a gun. He wanted as much of the law on his side, even though there was no witness to it, as he could have, for the sake of his conscience and his peace.

Just a moment the fence-cutter hesitated, making no movement to pull a gun, then he seemed to decide in a flash that he could not escape the way that he had come. He leaned low over his horse's neck, as if he expected Lambert to begin shooting, rode through the gap that he had cut in the fence, and galloped swiftly into the pasture.

Lambert followed, sensing the scheme at a glance. The rascal intended to either ride across the pasture, hoping to outrun his pursuer in the three miles of up-and-down country, or turn when he had a safe lead and go back. As the chase led away, it became plain that the plan was to make a run for the farther fence, cut it and get away before Lambert could come up. That arrangement suited Lambert admirably; it would seem to give him all the law on his side that any man could ask.

There was a scrubby growth of brush on the hillsides, and tall red willows along the streams, making a covert here and there for a horse. The fleeing man took advantage of every offering of this nature, as if he rode in constant fear of the bullet that he knew was his due. Added to this cunning, he was well mounted, his horse being almost equal in speed to Whetstone, it seemed, at the beginning of the race.

Lambert pushed him as hard as he thought wise, conserving his horse for the advantage that he knew he would have while the fence-cutter stopped to make himself an outlet. The fel-

low rode hard, unsparing of his quirt, jumping his long-legged horse over rocks and across ravines.

It was in one of these leaps that Lambert saw something fall from the saddle holster. He found it to be the nippers with which the fence had been cut, lying in the bottom of the deep arroyo. He rode down and recovered the tool, in no hurry now, for he was quite certain that the fence-cutter would not have another. He would discover his loss when he came to the fence, and then, if he was not entirely the coward and sneak that his actions seemed to brand him, he would have recourse to another tool.

It did not take them long to finish the three-mile race across the pasture, and it turned out in the end exactly as Lambert thought it would. When the fugitive came within a few rods of the fence he put his hand down to the holster for his nippers, discovering his loss. Then he looked back to see how closely he was pressed, which was very close indeed.

Lambert felt that he did not want to be the aggressor, even on his own land, in spite of the determination he had reached for such a con-

tingency as this. He recalled what Vesta had said about the impossibility of securing a conviction for cutting a fence. Surely if a man could not be held responsible for this act in the courts of the country, it would fare hard with one who might kill him in the commission of the outrage. Let him draw first, and then ——

The fellow rode at the fence as if he intended to try to jump it. His horse balked at the barrier, turned, raced along it, Lambert in close pursuit, coming alongside him as he was reaching to draw his pistol from the holster at his saddle bow. And in that instant, as the fleeing rider bent tugging at the gun which seemed to be strapped in the holster, Lambert saw that it was not a man.

A strand of dark hair had fallen from under the white sombrero; it was dropping lower and lower as it uncoiled from its anchorage. Lambert pressed his horse forward a few feet, leaned far over and snatched away the hand that struggled to unbuckle the weapon.

She turned on him, her face scarlet in its fury, their horses racing side by side, their stirrups clashing. Distorted as her features were

by anger and scorn at the touch of one so despised, Lambert felt his heart leap and fall, and seem to stand still in his bosom. It was not only a girl; it was *his* girl, the girl of the beckoning hand.

CHAPTER XII

THE FURY OF DOVES

LAMBERT released her the moment that he made his double discovery, foolishly shaken, foolishly hurt, to realize that she had been afraid to have him know it was a woman he pursued. He caught her rein and checked her horse along with his own.

"There's no use to run away from me," he said, meaning to quiet her fear. She faced him scornfully, seemingly to understand it as a boast.

"You wouldn't say that to a man, you coward!"

Again he felt a pang, like a blow from an ungrateful hand. She was breathing fast, her dark eyes spiteful, defiant, her face eloquent of the scorn that her words had only feebly expressed. He turned his head, as if considering her case and revolving in his mind what punishment to apply.

She was dressed in riding breeches, with Mexican goatskin chaps, a heavy gray shirt such as was common to cowboys, a costly white sombrero, its crown pinched to a peak in the Mexican fashion. With the big handkerchief on her neck flying as she rode, and the crouching posture that she had assumed in the saddle every time her pursuer began to close up on her in the race just ended, Lambert's failure to identify her sex was not so inexcusable as might appear. And he was thinking that she had been afraid to have him know she was a girl.

His discovery had left him dumb, his mind confused by a cross-current of emotions. He was unable to relate her with the present situation, although she was unmistakably before his eyes, her disguise ineffectual to change one line of her body as he recalled her leaning over the railing of the car, her anger unable to efface one feature as pictured in his memory.

"What are you going to do about it?" she asked him defiantly, not a hint in her bearing of shame for her discovery, or contrition for her crime.

"I guess you'd better go home."

He spoke in gentle reproof, as to a child caught in some trespass well-nigh unforgivable, but to whose offense he had closed his eyes out of considerations which only the forgiving understand. He looked her full in the eyes as he spoke, the disappointment and pain of his discovery in his face. The color blanched out of her cheeks, she stared at him a moment in waking astonishment, her eyes just as he remembered them when they drew him on in his perilous race after the train.

Such a flame rose in him that he felt it must make him transparent, and lay his deepest sentiments bare before her gaze. So she looked at him a moment, eye to eye, the anger gone out of her face, the flash of scorn no longer glinting in the dark well of her eye. But if she recognized him she did not speak of it. Almost at once she turned away, as from the face of a stranger, looking back over the way that she had ridden in such headlong flight.

He believed she was ashamed to have him know she recognized him. It was not for him to speak of the straining little act that romance had cast them for at their first meeting. Per-

haps under happier circumstances she would have recalled it, and smiled, and given him her hand. Embarrassment must attend her here, no matter how well she believed herself to be justified in her destructive raids against the fence.

"I'll have to go back the way I came," she said.

"There is no other way."

They started back in silence, riding side by side. Wonder filled the door of his mind; he had only disconnected, fragmentary thoughts, upon the current of which there rose continually the realization, only half understood, that he started out to search the world for this woman, and he had found her.

That he had discovered her in the part of a petty, spiteful lawbreaker, dressed in an outlandish and unbecoming garb, did not trouble him. If he was conscious of it at all, indeed, the hurrying turmoil of his thoughts pushed it aside like drifted leaves by the way. The wonderful thing was that he had found her, and at the end of a pursuit so hot it might have been a continuation of his first race for the trophy of white linen in her hand.

Presently this fog cleared; he came back to the starting-point of it, to the coldness of his disappointment. More than once in that chase across the pasture his hand had dropped to his pistol in the sober intention of shooting the fugitive, despised as one lower than a thief. She seemed to sound his troubled thoughts, riding there by his side like a friend.

"It was our range, and they fenced it!" she said, with all the feeling of a feudist.

"I understand that Philbrook bought the land; he had a right to fence it."

"He didn't have any right to buy it; they didn't have any right to sell it to him! This was our range; it was the best range in the country. Look at the grass here, and look at it outside of that fence."

"I think it's better here because it's been fenced and grazed lightly so long."

"Well, they didn't have any right to fence it."

"Cutting it won't make it any better now."

"I don't care, I'll cut it again! If I had my way about it I'd drive our cattle in here where they've got a right to be."

"I don't understand the feeling of you people in this country against fences; I came from a place where everybody's got them. But I suppose it's natural, if you could get down to the bottom of it."

"If there's one thing unnatural, it's a fence," she said.

They rode on a little way, saying nothing more. Then she:

"I thought the man they call the Duke of Chimney Butte was working on this side of the ranch?"

"That's a nickname they gave me over at the Syndicate when I first struck this country. It doesn't mean anything at all."

"I thought you were his partner," she said.

"No, I'm the monster himself."

She looked at him quickly, very close to smiling.

"Well, you don't look so terrible, after all. I think a man like you would be ashamed to have a woman boss over him."

"I hadn't noticed it, Miss Kerr."

"She told you about me," she charged, with resentful stress.

"No."

So they rode on, their thoughts between them, a word, a silence, nothing worth while said on either side, coming presently to the gap she had made in the wire.

"I thought you'd hand me over to the sheriff," she told him, between banter and defiance.

"They say you couldn't get a conviction on anything short of cattle stealing in this part of the country, and doubtful on that. But I wouldn't give you over to the sheriff, Miss Kerr, even if I caught you driving off a cow."

"What would you do?" she asked, her head bent, her voice low.

"I'd try to argue you out of the cow first, and then teach you better," he said, with such evident seriousness that she turned her face away, he thought to hide a smile.

She stopped her horse between the dangling ends of wire. Her long braid of black hair was swinging down her back to her cantle, her hard ride having disarranged its cunning deceit beneath her hat until it drooped over her ears and blew in loose strands over her dark, wildly

piquant face, out of which the hard lines of defiance had not quite melted.

She was not as handsome as Vesta Philbrook, he admitted, but there was something about her that moved emotions in him which slept in the other's presence. Perhaps it was the romance of their first meeting; perhaps it was the power of her dark, expressive eyes. Certainly Lambert had seen many prettier women in his short experience, but none that ever made his soul vibrate with such exquisite, sweet pain.

"If you owned this ranch, Mr. ——"

"Lambert is my name, Miss Kerr."

"If you owned it, Mr. Lambert, I believe we could live in peace, even if you kept the fence. But with that girl — it can't be done."

"Here are your nippers, Miss Kerr; you lost them when you jumped that arroyo. Won't you please leave the fence-cutting to the men of the family, if it has to be done, after this?"

"We have to use them on the range since Philbrook cut us off from water," she explained, "and hired men don't take much interest in a person's family quarrels. They're afraid of

Vesta Philbrook, anyhow. She can pick a man off a mile with her rifle, they believe, but she can't. I'm not afraid of her; I never was afraid of old Philbrook, the old devil."

Even though she concluded with that spiteful little stab, she gave the explanation as if she believed it due Lambert's generous leniency and courteous behavior.

"And there being no men of the family who will undertake it, and no hired men who can be interested, you have to cut the fence yourself," he said.

" I know you think I ought to be ashamed of cutting her fence," she said, her head bent, her eyes veiled, " but I'm not."

" I expect I'd feel it that way if it was my quarrel, too."

"Any man like you would. I've been where they have fences, too, and signs to keep off the grass. It's different here."

" Can't we patch up a truce between us for the time I'm here? "

He put out his hand in entreaty, his lean face earnest, his clear eyes pleading. She colored quickly at the suggestion, and framed a hot

reply. He could see it forming, and went on hurriedly to forestall it.

"I don't expect to be here always! I didn't come here looking for a job. I was going West with a friend; we stopped off on the way through."

"Riding fence for a woman boss is a low-down job."

"There's not much to it for a man that likes to change around. Maybe I'll not stay very long. We'd just as well have peace while I'm here."

"You haven't got anything to do with it — you're only a fence-rider! The fight's between me and that girl, and I'll cut her fence — I'll cut her heart out if she gets in my road!"

"Well, I'm going to hook up this panel," he said, leaning and taking hold of the wire end, "so you can come here and let it down any time you feel like you have to cut the fence. That will do us about the same damage, and you every bit as much good."

She was moved out of her sullen humor by this proposal for giving vent to her passion against Vesta Philbrook. It seemed as if he

regarded her as a child, and her part in this fence-feud a piece of irresponsible folly. It was so absurd in her eyes that she laughed.

"I suppose you're in earnest, but if you knew how foolish it sounds!"

"That's what I'm going to do, anyway. You know I'll just keep on fixing the fence when you cut it, and this arrangement will save both of us trouble. I'll put a can or something on one of the posts to mark the spot for you."

"This fence isn't any joke with us, Mr. Lambert, funny as you seem to think it. It's more than a fence, it's a symbol of all that stands between us, all the wrongs we've suffered, and the losses, on account of it. I know it makes her rave to cut it, and I expect you'll have a good deal of fixing to do right along."

She started away, stopped a few rods beyond the fence, came back.

"There's always a place for a good man over at our ranch," she said.

He watched her braid of hair swinging from side to side as she galloped away, with no regret for his rejected truce of the fence. She would come back to cut it again, and again he would

see her. Disloyal as it might be to his employer, he hoped she would not delay the next excursion long.

He had found her. No matter for the conditions under which the discovery had been made, his quest was at an end, his long flights of fancy were done. It was a marvelous thing for him, more wonderful than the realization of his first expectations would have been. This wild spirit of the girl was well in accord with the character he had given her in his imagination. When he watched her away that day at Misery he knew she was the kind of woman who would exact much of a man; as he looked after her now he realized that she would require more.

The man who found his way to her heart would have to take up her hatreds, champion her feuds, ride in her forays, follow her wild will against her enemies. He would have to sink the refinements of his civilization, in a measure, discard all preconceived ideas of justice and honor. He would have to hate a fence.

The thought made him smile. He was so happy that he had found her that he could have absolved her of a deeper blame than this. He

felt, indeed, as if he had come to the end of vast wanderings, a peace as of the cessation of turmoils in his heart. Perhaps this was because of the immensity of the undertaking which so lately had lain before him, its resumption put off from day to day, its proportions increasing with each deferment.

He made no movement to dismount and hook up the cut wires, but sat looking after her as she grew smaller between him and the hill. He was so wrapped in his new and pleasant fancies that he did not hear the approach of a horse on the slope of the rise until its quickened pace as it reached the top brought Vesta Philbrook suddenly into his view.

"Who is that?" she asked, ignoring his salutation in her excitement.

"I think it must be Miss Kerr; she belongs to that family, at least."

"You caught her cutting the fence?"

"Yes, I caught her at it."

"And you let her get away?"

"There wasn't much else that I could do," he returned, with thoughtful gravity.

Vesta sat in her saddle as rigid and erect as

a statue, looking after the disappearing rider. Lambert contrasted the two women in mental comparison, struck by the difference in which rage manifested itself in their bearing. This one seemed as cold as marble; the other had flashed and glowed like hot iron. The cold rigidity before his eyes must be the slow wrath against which men are warned.

The distant rider had reached the top of the hill from which she had spied out the land. Here she pulled up and looked back, turning her horse to face them when she saw that Lambert's employer had joined him. A little while she gazed back at them, then waved her hat as in exultant challenge, whirled her horse, and galloped over the hill.

That was the one taunt needed to set off the slow magazine of Vesta Philbrook's wrath. She cut her horse a sharp blow with her quirt and took up the pursuit so quickly that Lambert could not interpose either objection or entreaty.

Lambert felt like an intruder who had witnessed something not intended for his eyes. He had no thought at that moment of following and attempting to prevent what might turn out a

regretful tragedy, but sat there reviling the land that nursed women on such a rough breast as to inspire these savage passions of reprisal and revenge.

Vesta was riding a big brown gelding, long-necked, deep-chested, slim of hindquarters as a hound. Unless rough ground came between them she would overhaul that Kerr girl inside of four miles, for her horse lacked the wind for a long race, as the chase across the pasture had shown. In case that Vesta overtook her, what would she do? The answer to that was in Vesta's eyes when she saw the cut wire, the raider riding free across the range. It was such an answer that it shot through Lambert like a lightning-stroke.

Yet, it was not his quarrel; he could not interfere on one side or the other without drawing down the displeasure of somebody, nor as a neutral without incurring the wrath of both. This view of it did not relieve him of anxiety to know how the matter was going to terminate.

He gave Whetstone the reins and galloped after Vesta, who was already over the hill. As he rode he began to realize as never before the

smallness of this fence-cutting feud, the really worthless bone at the bottom of the contention. Here Philbrook had fenced in certain lands which all men agreed he had been cheated in buying, and here uprose those who scorned him for his gullibility, and lay in wait to murder him for shutting them out of his admittedly worthless domain. It was a quarrel beyond reason to a thinking man.

Nobody could blame Philbrook for defending his rights, but they seemed such worthless possessions to stake one's life against day by day, year after year. The feud of the fence was like a cancerous infection. It spread to and poisoned all that the wind blew on around the borders of that melancholy ranch.

Here were these two women riding break-neck and bloody-eyed to pull guns and fight after the code of the roughest. Both of them were primed by the accumulated hatred of their young lives to deeds of violence with no thought of consequences. It was a hard and bitter land that could foster and feed such passions in bosoms of so much native excellence; a rough and boisterous land, unworthy the labor that

men lavished on it to make therein their refuge and their home.

The pursued was out of sight when Lambert gained the hilltop, the pursuer just disappearing behind a growth of stunted brushwood in the winding dry valley beyond. He pushed after them, his anxiety increasing, hoping that he might overtake Vesta before she came within range of her enemy. Even should he succeed in this, he was at fault for some way of stopping her in her passionate design.

He could not disarm her without bringing her wrath down on himself, or attempt to persuade her without rousing her suspicion that he was leagued with her destructive neighbors. On the other hand, the fence-cutting girl would believe that he had wittingly joined in an unequal and unmanly pursuit. A man's dilemma between the devil and the deep water would be simple compared to his.

All this he considered as he galloped along, leaving the matter of keeping the trail mainly to his horse. He emerged from the hemming brushwood, entering a stretch of hard tableland where the parched grass was red, the earth so

hard that a horse made no hoofprint in passing. Across this he hurried in a ferment of fear that he would come too late, and down a long slope where sage grew again, the earth dry and yielding about its unlovely clumps.

Here he discovered that he had left too much to his horse. The creature had laid a course to suit himself, carrying him off the trail of those whom he sought in such breathless state. He stopped, looking round him to fix his direction, discovering to his deep vexation that Whetstone had veered from the course that he had laid for him into the south, and was heading toward the river.

On again in the right direction, swerving sharply in the hope that he would cut the trail. So for a mile or more, in dusty, headlong race, coming then to the rim of a bowl-like valley and the sound of running shots.

Lambert's heart contracted in a paroxysm of fear for the lives of both those flaming combatants as he rode precipitately into the little valley. The shooting had ceased when he came into the clear and pulled up to look for Vesta.

The next second the two girls swept into

sight. Vesta had not only overtaken her enemy, but had ridden round her and cut off her retreat. She was driving her back toward the spot where Lambert stood, shooting at her as she fled, with what seemed to him a cruel and deliberate hand.

CHAPTER XIII

"NO HONOR IN HER BLOOD"

VESTA was too far behind the other girl for anything like accurate shooting with a pistol, but Lambert feared that a chance shot might hit, with the most melancholy consequences for both parties concerned. No other plan presenting, he rode down with the intention of placing himself between them.

Now the Kerr girl had her gun out, and had turned, offering battle. She was still a considerable distance beyond him, with what appeared from his situation to be some three or four hundred yards between the combatants, a safe distance for both of them if they would keep it. But Vesta had no intention of making it a long-range duel. She pulled her horse up and reloaded her gun, then spurred ahead, holding her fire.

Lambert saw all this as he swept down between them like an eagle, old Whetstone hardly

touching the ground. He cut the line between them not fifty feet from the Kerr girl's position, as Vesta galloped up.

He held up his hand in an appeal for peace between them. Vesta charged up to him as he shifted to keep in the line of their fire, coming as if she would ride him down and go on to make an end of that chapter of the long-growing feud. The Kerr girl waited, her pistol hand crossed on the other, with the deliberate coolness of one who had no fear of the outcome.

Vesta waved him aside, her face white as ash, and attempted to dash by. He caught her rein and whirled her horse sharply, bringing her face to face with him, her revolver lifted not a yard from his breast.

For a moment Lambert read in her eyes an intention that made his heart contract. He held his breath, waiting for the shot. A moment; the film of deadly passion that obscured her eyes like a smoke cleared, the threatening gun faltered, drooped, was lowered. He twisted in his saddle and commanded the Kerr girl with a swing of the arm to go.

She started her horse in a bound, and again

the soul-obscuring curtain of murderous hate fell over Vesta's eyes. She lifted her gun as Lambert, with a quick movement, clasped her wrist.

"For God's sake, Vesta, keep your soul clean!" he said.

His voice was vibrant with a deep earnestness that made him as solemn as a priest. She stared at him with widening eyes, something in his manner and voice that struck to reason through the insulation of her anger. Her fingers relaxed on the weapon; she surrendered it into his hand.

A little while she sat staring after the fleeing girl, held by what thoughts he could not guess. Presently the rider whisked behind a point of sage-dotted hill and was gone. Vesta lifted her hands slowly and pressed them to her eyes, shivering as if struck by a chill. Twice or thrice this convulsive shudder shook her. She bowed her head a little, the sound of a sob behind her pressing hands.

Lambert put her pistol back into the holster which dangled on her thigh from the cartridge-studded belt round her pliant, slender waist.

"Let me take you home, Vesta," he said.

She withdrew her hands, discovering tears on her cheeks. Saying nothing, she started to retrace the way of that mad, murderous race. She did not resent his familiar address, if conscious of it at all, for he spoke with the sympathetic tenderness one employs toward a suffering child.

They rode back to the fence without a word between them. When they came to the cut wires he rode through as if he intended to continue on with her to the ranchhouse, six or seven miles away.

"I can go on alone, Mr. Lambert," she said.

"My tools are down here a mile or so. I'll have to get them to fix this hole."

A little way again in silence. Although he rode slowly she made no effort to separate from his company and go her way alone. She seemed very weary and depressed, her sensitive face reflecting the strain of the past hour. It had borne on her with the wearing intensity of sleepless nights.

"I'm tired of this fighting and contending for evermore!" she said.

Lambert offered no comment. There was little, indeed, that he could frame on his tongue to fit the occasion, it seemed to him, still under the shadow of the dreadful thing that he had averted but a little while before. There was a feeling over him that he had seen this warm, breathing woman, with the best of her life before her, standing on the brink of a terrifying chasm into which one little movement would have precipitated her beyond the help of any friendly hand.

She did not realize what it meant to take the life of another, even with full justification at her hand; she never had felt that weight of ashes above the heart, or the presence of the shadow that tinctured all life with its somber gloom. It was one thing for the law to absolve a slayer; another to find absolution in his own conscience. It was a strain that tried a man's mind. A woman like Vesta Philbrook might go mad under the unceasing pressure and chafing of that load.

When they came to where his tools and wire lay beside the fence, she stopped. Lambert dismounted in silence, tied a coil of wire to his

saddle, strung the chain of the wire-stretcher on his arm.

"Did you know her before you came here?" she asked, with such abruptness, such lack of preparation for the question, that it seemed a fragment of what had been running through her mind.

"You mean——?"

"That woman, Grace Kerr."

"No, I never knew her."

"I thought maybe you'd met her, she's been away at school somewhere — Omaha, I think. Were you talking to her long?"

"Only a little while."

"What did you think of her?"

"I thought," said he, slowly, his face turned from her, his eyes on something miles away, "that she was a girl something could be made out of if she was taken hold of the right way. I mean," facing her earnestly, "that she might be reasoned out of this senseless barbarity, this raiding and running away."

Vesta shook her head. "The devil's in her; she was born to make trouble."

"I got her to half agree to a truce," said he,

reluctantly, his eyes studying the ground, " but I guess it's all off now."

" She wouldn't keep her word with you," she declared with great earnestness, a sad, rather than scornful earnestness, putting out her hand as if to touch his shoulder. Half way her intention seemed to falter; her hand fell in eloquent expression of her heavy thoughts.

" Of course, I don't know."

" There's no honor in the Kerr blood. Kerr was given many a chance by father to come up and be a man, and square things between them, but he didn't have it in him. Neither has she. Her only brother was killed at Glendora after he'd shot a man in the back."

" It ought to have been settled, long ago, without all this fighting. But if people refuse to live by their neighbors and be decent, a good man among them has a hard time. I don't blame you, Vesta, for the way you feel."

" I'd have been willing to let this feud die, but she wouldn't drop it. She began cutting the fence every summer as soon as I came home. She's goaded me out of my senses, she's put murder in my heart! "

"They've tried you almost past endurance, I know. But you've never killed anybody, Vesta. All there is here isn't worth that price."

"I know it now," she said, wearily.

"Go home and hang your gun up, and let it stay there. As long as I'm here I'll do the fighting when there's any to be done."

"You didn't help me a little while ago. All you did was for her."

"It was for both of you," he said, rather indignant that she should take such an unjust view of his interference.

"You didn't ride in front of her and stop her from shooting me!"

"I came to you first — you saw that."

Lambert mounted, turned his horse to go back and mend the fence. She rode after him, impulsively.

"I'm going to stop fighting, I'm going to take my gun off and put it away," she said.

He thought she never had appeared so handsome as at that moment, a soft light in her eyes, the harshness of strain and anger gone out of her face. He offered her his hand, the

only expression of his appreciation for her generous decision that came to him in the gratefulness of the moment. She took it as if to seal a compact between them.

" You've come back to be a woman again," he said, hardly realizing how strange his words might seem to her, expressing the one thought that came to the front.

" I suppose I didn't act much like a woman out there a while ago," she admitted, her old expression of sadness darkening in her eyes.

" You were a couple of wildcats," he told her. " Maybe we can get on here now without fighting, but if they come crowding it on let us menfolks take care of it for you; it's no job for a girl."

" I'm going to put the thought of it out of my mind, feud, fences, everything — and turn it all over to you. It's asking a lot of you to assume, but I'm tired to the heart."

" I'll do the best by you I can as long as I'm here," he promised, simply. He started on; she rode forward with him.

" If she comes back again, what will you do? "

"I'll try to show her where she's wrong, and maybe I can get her to hang up her gun, too. You ought to be friends, it seems to me — a couple of neighbor girls like you."

"We couldn't be that," she said, loftily, her old coldness coming over her momentarily, "but if we can live apart in peace it will be something. Don't trust her, Mr. Lambert, don't take her word for anything. There's no honor in the Kerr blood; you'll find that out for yourself. It isn't in one of them to be even a disinterested friend."

There was nothing for him to say to this, spoken so seriously that it seemed almost a prophecy. He felt as if she had looked into the window of his heart and read his secret and, in her old enmity for this slim girl of the dangling braid of hair, was working subtly to raise a barrier of suspicion and distrust between them.

"I'll go on home and quit bothering you," she said.

"You're no bother to me, Vesta; I like to have you along."

She stopped, looked toward the place where she had lately ridden through the fence in

vengeful pursuit of her enemy, her eyes inscrutable, her face sad.

"I never felt it so lonesome out here as it is today," she said, and turned her horse, and left him.

He looked back more than once as he rode slowly along the fence, a mist before his perception that he could not pierce. What had come over Vesta to change her so completely in this little while? He believed she was entering the shadow of some slow-growing illness, which bore down her spirits in an uninterpreted foreboding of evil days to come.

What a pretty figure she made in the saddle, riding away from him in that slow canter; how well she sat, how she swayed at the waist as her nimble animal cut in and out among the clumps of sage. A mighty pretty girl, and as good as they grew them anywhere. It would be a calamity to have her sick. From the shoulder of the slope he looked back again. Pretty as any woman a man ever pictured in his dreams.

She passed out of sight without looking back, and there rose a picture in his thoughts to take her place, a picture of dark, defiant eyes, of tell-

tale hair falling in betrayal of her disguise, as if discovering her secret to him who had a right to know.

The fancy pleased him; as he worked to repair the damage she had wrought, he smiled. How well his memory retained her, in her transition from anger to scorn, scorn to uneasy amazement, amazement to relief. Then she had smiled, and the recognition not owned in words but spoken in her eyes, had come.

Yes, she knew him; she recalled her challenge, his acceptance and victory. Even as she rode swiftly to obey him out of that mad encounter in the valley over there, she had owned in her quick act that she knew him, and trusted him as she sped away.

When he came to the place where she had ridden through, he pieced the wire and hooked the ends together, as he had told her he would do. He handled even the stubborn wire tenderly, as a man might the appurtenances to a rite. Perhaps he was linking their destinies in that simple act, he thought, sentimentally unreasonable; it might be that this spot would mark the second altar of his romance, even as the little

station of Misery was lifted up in his heart as the shrine of its beginning.

There was blood on his knuckles where the vicious wire had torn him. He dashed it to the ground as a libation, smiling like one moon-struck, a flood of soft fancies making that bleak spot dear.

CHAPTER XIV

NOTICE IS SERVED

TATERLEG was finding things easier on his side of the ranch. Nick Hargus was lying still, no hostile acts had been committed. This may have been due to the fierce and bristling appearance of Taterleg, as he humorously declared, or because Hargus was waiting reenforcements from the penal institutions of his own and surrounding states.

Taterleg had a good many nights to himself, as a consequence of the security which his grisly exterior had brought. These he spent at Glendora, mainly on the porch of the hotel in company of Alta Wood, chewing gum together as if they wove a fabric to bind their lives in adhesive amity to the end.

Lambert had a feeling of security for his line of fence, also, as he rode home on the evening of his adventurous day. He had left a note on the pieced wire reminding Grace Kerr of his

request that she ease her spite by unhooking it there instead of cutting it in a new place. He also added the information that he would be there on a certain date to see how well she carried out his wish.

He wondered whether she would read his hope that she would be there at the same hour, or whether she might be afraid to risk Vesta Philbrook's fury again. There was an eagerness in him for the hastening of the intervening time, a joyous lightness which tuned him to such harmony with the world that he sang as he rode.

Taterleg was going to Glendora that night. He pressed Lambert to join him.

"A man's got to take a day off sometimes to rest his face and hands," he argued. "Them fellers can't run off any stock tonight, and if they do they can't git very far away with 'em before we'd be on their necks. They know that; they're as safe as if we had 'em where they belong."

"I guess you're right on that, Taterleg. I've got to go to town to buy me a pair of clothes, anyhow, so I'll go you."

Taterleg was as happy as a cricket, humming a tune as he went along. He had made liberal application of perfume to his handkerchief and mustache, and of barber's pomatum to his hair. He had fixed his hat on carefully, for the protection of the cowlick that came down over his left eyebrow, and he could not be stirred beyond a trot all the way to Glendora for fear of damage that might result.

"I had a run-in with that feller the other night," he said.

"What feller do you mean?"

"Jedlick, dern him."

"You did? I didn't notice any of your ears bit off."

"No, we didn't come to licks. He tried to horn in while me and Alta was out on the porch."

"What did you do?"

"I didn't have a show to do anything but hand him a few words. Alta she got me by the arm and drug me in the parlor and slammed the door. No use tryin' to break away from that girl; she could pull a elephant away from his hay if she took a notion."

"Didn't Jedlick try to hang on?"

"No, he stood out in the office rumblin' to the old man, but that didn't bother me no more than the north wind when you're in bed under four blankets. Alta she played me some tunes on her *git*-tar and sung me some songs. I tell you, Duke, I just laid back and shut my eyes. I felt as easy as if I owned the railroad from here to Omaha."

"How long are you going to keep it up?"

"Which up, Duke?"

"Courtin' Alta. You'll have to show off your tricks pretty regular, I think, if you want to hold your own in that ranch."

Taterleg rode along considering it.

"Ye-es, I guess a feller'll have to act if he wants to hold Alta. She's young, and the young like change. 'Specially the girls. A man to keep Alta on the line'll have to marry her and set her to raisin' children. You know, Duke, there's something new to a girl in every man she sees. She likes to have him around till she leans ag'in' him and rubs the paint off, then she's out shootin' eyes at another one."

"Are there others besides Jedlick?"

"That bartender boards there at the *ho*-tel. He's got four gold teeth, and he picks 'em with a quill. Sounds like somebody slappin' the crick with a fishin'-pole. But them teeth give him a standin' in society; they look like money in the bank. Nothing to his business, though, Duke; no sentiment or romance or anything."

"Not much. Who else is there sitting in this Alta game?"

"Young feller with a neck like a bottle, off of a ranch somewhere back in the hills."

Taterleg mentioned him as with consideration. Lambert concluded that he was a rival to be reckoned with, but gave Taterleg his own way of coming to that.

"That feller's got a watch with a music box in the back of it, Duke. Ever see one of 'em?"

"No, I never did."

"Well, he's got one of 'em, all right. He starts that thing up about the time he hits the steps, and comes in playin' 'Sweet Vilelets' like he just couldn't help bustin' out in music the minute he comes in sight of Alta. That feller gives me a pain!"

The Duke smiled. To every man his own af-

fair is romance; every other man's a folly or a diverting comedy, indeed.

"She's a little too keen on that feller to suit me, Duke. She sets out there with him, and winds that fool watch and plays them two tunes over till you begin to sag, leanin' her elbow on his shoulder like she had him paid for and didn't care whether he broke or not."

"What is the other tune?"

"It's that one that goes:

A heel an' a toe and a po'ky-o,
A heel an' a toe and a po'ky-o

—you know that one."

"I've heard it. She'll get tired of that watch after a while, Taterleg."

"Maybe. If she don't, I guess I'll have to figger some way to beat it."

"What are Jedlick's attractions? Surely not good looks."

"Money, Duke; that's the answer to him—money. He's got a salt barrel full of it; the old man favors him for that money."

"That's harder to beat than a music box in a watch."

"You *can't* beat it, Duke. What's good looks by the side of money? Or brains? Well, they don't amount to cheese!"

"Are you goin' to sidestep in favor of Jedlick? A man with all your experience and good clothes!"

"Me? I'm a-goin' to lay that feller out on a board!"

They hitched at the hotel rack, that looking more respectable, as Taterleg said, than to leave their horses in front of the saloon. Alta was heard singing in the interior; there were two railroad men belonging to a traveling paint gang on the porch smoking their evening pipes.

Lambert felt that it was his duty to buy cigars in consideration of the use of the hitching-rack. Wood appeared in the office door as they came up the steps, and put his head beyond the jamb, looking this way and that, like a man considering a sortie with enemies lying in wait.

Taterleg went into the parlor to offer the incense of his cigar in the presence of Alta, who was cooing a sentimental ballad to her guitar. It seemed to be of parting, and the hope of reunion, involving one named Irene. There was

a run in the chorus accompaniment which Alta had down very neatly.

The tinkling guitar, the simple, plaintive melody, sounded to Lambert as refreshing as the plash of a brook in the heat of the day. He stood listening, his elbow on the show case, thinking vaguely that Alta had a good voice for singing babies to sleep.

Wood stood in the door again, his stump of arm lifted a little with an alertness about it that made Lambert think of a listening ear. He looked up and down the street in that uneasy, inquiring way that Lambert had remarked on his arrival, then came back and got himself a cigar. He stood across the counter from Lambert a little while, smoking, his brows drawn in trouble, his eyes shifting constantly to the door.

"Duke," said he, as if with an effort, "there's a man in town lookin' for you. I thought I'd tell you."

"Lookin' for me? Who is he?"

"Sim Hargus."

"You don't mean Nick?"

"No; he's Nick's brother. I don't suppose you ever met him."

"I never heard of him."

"He's only been back from Wyoming a week or two. He was over there some time — several years, I believe."

"In the pen over there?"

Wood took a careful survey of the door before replying, working his cigar over to the other side of his mouth in the way that a one-armed man acquires the trick.

"I — they say he got mixed up in a cattle deal down there."

Lambert smoked in silence a little while, his head bent, his face thoughtful. Wood shifted a little nearer, standing straight and alert behind his counter as if prepared to act in some sudden emergency.

"Does he live around here?" Lambert asked.

"He's workin' for Berry Kerr, foreman over there. That's the job he used to have before he — left."

Lambert grunted, expressing that he understood the situation. He stood in his leaning, careless posture, arm on the show case, thumb hooked in his belt near his gun.

"I thought I'd tell you," said Wood uneasily.

"Thanks."

Wood came a step nearer along the counter, leaned his good arm on it, watching the door without a break.

"He's one of the old gang that used to give Philbrook so much trouble — he's carryin' lead that Philbrook shot into him now. So he's got it in for that ranch, and everybody on it. I thought I'd tell you."

"I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Wood," said Lambert heartily.

"He's one of these kind of men you want to watch out for when your back's turned, Duke."

"Thanks, old feller; I'll keep in mind what you say."

"I don't want it to look like I was on one side or the other, you understand, Duke; but I thought I'd tell you. Sim Hargus is one of them kind of men that a woman don't dare to show her face around where he is without the risk of bein' insulted. He's a foul-mouthed, foul-minded man, the kind of a feller that ought to be treated like a rattlesnake in the road."

Lambert thanked him again for his friendly information, understanding at once his watchful uneasiness and the absence of Alta from the front of the house. He was familiar with that type of man such as Wood had described Hargus as being; he had met some of them in the Bad Lands. There was nothing holy to them in the heavens or the earth. They did not believe there was any such thing as a virtuous woman, and honor was a word they never had heard defined.

"I'll go out and look him up," Lambert said. "If he happens to come in here askin' about me, I'll be in either the store or the saloon."

"There's where he is, Duke — in the saloon."

"I supposed he was."

"You'll kind of run into him natural, won't you, Duke, and not let him think I tipped you off?"

"Just as natural as the wind."

Lambert went out. From the hitching-rack he saw Wood at his post of vigil in the door, watching the road with anxious mien. It was a Saturday night; the town was full of visitors. Lam-

bert went on to the saloon, hitching at the long rack in front where twenty or thirty horses stood.

The custom of the country made it almost an obligatory courtesy to go in and spend money when one hitched in front of a saloon, an excuse for entering that Lambert accepted with a grim feeling of satisfaction. While he didn't want it to appear that he was crowding a quarrel with any man, the best way to meet a fellow who had gone spreading it abroad that he was out looking for one was to go where he was to be found. It wouldn't look right to leave town without giving Hargus a chance to state his business; it would be a move subject to misinterpretation, and damaging to a man's good name.

There was a crowd in the saloon, which had a smoky, blurred look through the open door. Some of the old gambling gear had been uncovered and pushed out from the wall. A faro game was running, with a dozen or more players, at the end of the bar; several poker tables stretched across the gloomy front of what had been the ballroom of more hilarious days. These players were a noisy outfit. Little money

was being risked, but it was going with enough profanity to melt it.

Lambert stood at the end of the bar near the door, his liquor in his hand, lounging in his careless attitude of abstraction. But there was not a lax fiber in his body; every faculty was alert, every nerve set for any sudden development. The scene before him was disgusting, rather than diverting, in its squalid imitation of the rough-and-ready times which had passed before many of these men were old enough to carry the weight of a gun. It was just a sporadic outburst, a pustule come to a sudden head that would burst before morning and clear away.

Lambert ran his eye among the twenty-five or thirty men in the place. All appeared to be strangers to him. He began to assort their faces, as one searches for something in a heap, trying to fix on one that looked mean enough to belong to a Hargus. A mechanical banjo suddenly added its metallic noise to the din, fit music, it seemed, for such obscene company. Some started to dance lumberingly, with high-lifted legs and ludicrous turkey struts.

Among these Lambert recognized Tom Har-

gus, the young man who had made the ungallant attempt to pass Vesta Philbrook's gate with his father. He had more whisky under his dark skin than he could take care of. As he jigged on limber legs he threw his hat down with a whoop, his long black hair falling around his ears and down to his eyes, bringing out the Indian that slept in him sharper than the liquor had done it.

His face was flushed, his eyes were heavy, as if he had been under headway a good while. Lambert watched him as he pranced about, chopping his steps with feet jerked up straight like a string-halt horse. The Indian was working, trying to express itself in him through this exaggerated imitation of his ancestral dances. His companions fell back in admiration, giving him the floor.

A cowboy was feeding money into the music box to keep it going, giving it a coin, together with certain grave, drunken advice, whenever it showed symptom of a pause. Young Hargus circled about in the middle of the room, barking in little short yelps. Every time he passed his hat he kicked at it, sometimes hitting, oftener

missing it, at last driving it over against Lambert's foot, where it lodged.

Lambert pushed it away. A man beside him gave it a kick that sent it spinning back into the trodden circle. Tom was at that moment rounding his beat at the farther end. He came face about just as the hat skimmed across the floor, stopped, jerked himself up stiffly, looked at Lambert with a leap of anger across his drunken face.

Immediately there was silence in the crowd that had been assisting on the side lines of his performance. They saw that Tom resented this treatment of his hat by any foot save his own. The man who had kicked it had fallen back with shoulders to the bar, where he stood presenting the face of innocence. Tom walked out to the hat, kicked it back within a few feet of Lambert, his hand on his gun.

He was all Indian now; the streak of smoky white man was engulfed. His handsome face was black with the surge of his lawless blood as he stopped a little way in front of Lambert.

"Pick up that hat!" he commanded, smothering his words in an avalanche of profanity.

Lambert scarcely changed his position, save to draw himself erect and stand clear of the bar. To those in front of him he seemed to be carelessly lounging, like a man with time on his hands, peace before him.

"Who was your nigger last year, young feller?" he asked, with good-humor in his words. He was reading Tom's eyes as a prize fighter reads his opponent's, watching every change of feature, every strain of facial muscle. Before young Hargus had put tension on his sinews to draw his weapon, Lambert had read his intention.

The muzzle of the pistol was scarcely free of the scabbard when Lambert cleared the two yards between them in one stride. A grip of the wrist, a twist of the arm, and the gun was flung across the room. Tom struggled desperately, not a word out of him, striking with his free hand. Sinewy as he was, he was only a toy in Lambert's hands.

"I don't want to have any trouble with you, kid," said Lambert, capturing Tom's other hand and holding him as he would have held a boy. "Put on your hat and go home."

Lambert released him, and turned as if he considered the matter ended. At his elbow a man stood, staring at him with insolent, threatening eyes. He was somewhat lower of stature than Lambert, thick in the shoulders, firmly set on the feet, with small mustache, almost colorless and harsh as hog bristles. His thin eyebrows were white, his hair but a shade darker, his skin light for an outdoors man. This, taken with his pale eyes, gave him an appearance of bloodless cruelty which the sneer on his lip seemed to deepen and express.

Behind Lambert men were holding Tom Hargus, who had made a lunge to recover his gun. He heard them trying to quiet him, while he growled and whined like a wolf in a trap. Lambert returned the stranger's stare, withholding anything from his eyes that the other could read, as some men born with a certain cold courage are able to do. He went back to the bar, the man going with him shoulder to shoulder, turning his malevolent eyes to continue his unbroken stare.

"Put up that gun!" the fellow said, turning sharply to Tom Hargus, who had wrenched free

and recovered his weapon. Tom obeyed him in silence, picked up his hat, beat it against his leg, put it on.

"You're the Duke of Chimney Butte, are you?" the stranger inquired, turning again with his sneer and cold, insulting eyes to Lambert, who knew him now for Sim Hargus, foreman for Berry Kerr.

"If you know me, there's no need for us to be introduced," Lambert returned.

"Duke of Chimney Butte!" said Hargus with immeasurable scorn. He grunted his words with such an intonation of insult that it would have been pardonable to shoot him on the spot. Lambert was slow to kindle. He put a curb now on even his naturally deliberate vehicle of wrath, looking the man through his shallow eyes down to the roots of his mean soul.

"You're the feller that's come here to teach us fellers to take off our hats when we see a fence," Hargus said, looking meaner with every breath.

"You've got it right, pardner," Lambert calmly replied.

"Duke of Chimney Butte! Well, pardner,

I'm the King of Hotfoot Valley, and I've got travelin' papers for you right here!"

"You seem to be a little sudden about it," Lambert said, a lazy drawl to his words that inflamed Hargus like a blow.

"Not half as sudden as you'll be, kid. This country ain't no place for you, young feller; you're too fresh to keep in this hot climate, and the longer you stay the hotter it gits. I'll give you just two days to make your gitaway in."

"Consider the two days up," said Lambert with such calm and such coolness of head that men who heard him felt a thrill of admiration.

"This ain't no joke!" Hargus corrected him.

"I believe you, Hargus. As far as it concerns me, I'm just as far from this country right now as I'll be in two days, or maybe two years. Consider your limit up."

It was so still in the barroom that one could have heard a match burn. Lambert had drawn himself up stiff and straight before Hargus, and stood facing him with defiance in every line of his stern, strong face.

"I've give you your rope," Hargus said,

feeling that he had been called to show his hand in an open manner that was not his style, and playing for a footing to save his face. "If you ain't gone in two days you'll settle with me."

"That goes with me, Hargus. It's your move."

Lambert turned, contempt in his courageous bearing, and walked out of the place, scorning to throw a glance behind to see whether Hargus came after him, or whether he laid hand to his weapon in the treachery that Lambert had read in his eyes.

CHAPTER XV

WOLVES OF THE RANGE

LAMBERT left his horse at the saloon hitching-rack while he went to the store. Business was brisk in that place, also, requiring a wait of half an hour before his turn came. In a short time thereafter he completed his purchases, tied his package to his saddle, and was ready to go home.

The sound of revelry was going forward again in the saloon, the mechanical banjo plugging away on its tiresome tune. There was a gap here and there at the rack where horses had been taken away, but most of them seemed to be anchored there for the night, standing dejectedly with drooping heads.

The tinkle of Alta's guitar sounded through the open window of the hotel parlor as he passed, indicating that Taterleg was still in that harbor. It would be selfish to call him, making the most as he was of a clear field.

Lambert smiled as he recalled the three-cornered rivalry for Alta's bony hand.

There was a lemon-rind slice of new moon low in the southwest, giving a dusky light, the huddling sage clumps at the roadside blotches of deepest shadow. Lambert ruminated on the trouble that had been laid out for him that night as he rode away from town, going slowly, in no hurry to put walls between him and the soft, pleasant night.

He was confronted by the disadvantage of an unsought notoriety, or reputation, or whatever his local fame might be called. A man with a fighting name must live up to it, however distasteful the strife and turmoil, or move beyond the circle of his fame. Move he would not, could not, although it seemed a foolish thing, on reflection, to hang on there in the lure of Grace Kerr's dark eyes.

What could a man reasonably expect of a girl with such people as Sim Hargus as her daily associates? Surely she had been schooled in their warped view of justice, as her act that day proved. No matter for Omaha and its refinements, she must be a savage under the skin.

But gentle or savage, he had a tender regard for her, a feeling of romantic sympathy that had been groping out to find her as a plant in a pit strains toward the light. Now, in the sunshine of her presence, would it flourish and grow green, or wither in its mistaken worship and die?

Vesta had warned him, not knowing anything of the peculiar circumstances which brought him to that place, or of his discovery, which seemed a revelation of fate, the conjunction of events shaped before his entry upon the stage, indeed. She had warned him, but in the face of things as they had taken place, what would it avail a man to turn his back on the arrangements of destiny? As it was written, so it must be lived. It was not in his hand or his heart to change it.

Turning these things in his mind, flavoring the bitter in the prospect with the sweet of romance, he was drawn out of his wanderings by the sudden starting of his horse. It was not a shying start, but a stiffening of attitude, a leap out of laxity into alertness, with a lifting of the head, a fixing of the ears as if on some object

ahead, of which it was at once curious and afraid.

Lambert was all tension in a breath. Ahead a little way the road branched at the point of the hill leading to the Philbrook house. His road lay to the right of the jutting plowshare of hill which seemed shaped for the mere purpose of splitting the highway. The other branch led to Kerr's ranch, and beyond. The horse was plainly scenting something in this latter branch of the road, still hidden by the bushes which grew as tall there as the head of a man on horseback.

As the horse trotted on, Lambert made out something lying in the road which looked, at that distance, like the body of a man. Closer approach proved this to be the case, indeed. Whether the man was alive or dead, it was impossible to determine from the saddle, but he lay in a huddled heap as if he had been thrown from a horse, his hat in the road some feet beyond.

Whetstone would not approach nearer than ten or twelve feet. There he stood, swelling his sides with long-drawn breaths, snorting his

warning, it seemed, expressing his suspicion in the best manner that he could command. Lambert spoke to him, but could not quiet his fear. He could feel the sensitive creature tremble under him, and took it as certain that the man must be dead.

Dismounting, he led the horse and bent over the man in the road. He could see the fellow's shoulder move as he breathed, and straightened up with a creeping of apprehension that this might be a trap to draw him into just such a situation as he found himself that moment. The nervousness of his horse rather increased than quieted, also, adding color to his fear.

His foot was in the stirrup when a quick rush sounded behind him. He saw the man on the ground spring to his feet, and quick on the consciousness of that fact there came a blow that stretched him as stiff as a dead man.

Lambert came to himself with a half-drowned sense of suffocation. Water was falling on his head, pouring over his face, and there was the confused sound of human voices around him. As he cleared he realized that somebody was standing over him, pouring water on his head.

He struggled to get from under the drowning stream. A man laughed, shook him, cursed him vilely close to his ear.

"Wake up, little feller, somebody's a-cuttin' your fence!" said another, taking hold of him from the other side.

"Don't hurt him, boys," admonished a third voice, which he knew for Berry Kerr's — "this is the young man who has come to the Bad Lands with a mission. He's going to teach people to take off their hats to barbed-wire fences. I wouldn't have him hurt for a keg of nails."

He came near Lambert now, put a hand on his shoulder, and asked him with a gentle kindness how he felt.

Lambert did not answer him, for he had no words adequate to describe his feelings at that moment to a friend, much less an enemy whose intentions were unknown. He sat, fallen forward, in a limp and miserable heap, drenched with water, clusters of fire gathering and breaking like showers of a rocket before his eyes. His head throbbed and ached in maddening pain. This was so great that it seemed to submerge every faculty save that of hearing, to paralyze

him so entirely that he could not lift a hand. That blow had all but killed him.

"Let him alone — he'll be all right in a minute," said Kerr's voice, sounding close to his ear as if he stooped to examine him.

One was standing behind Lambert, knees against his back to prevent his entire collapse. The others drew off a little way. There followed the sound of horses, as if they prepared to ride. It seemed as if the great pain in Lambert's head attended the return of consciousness, as it attends the return of circulation. It soon began to grow easier, settling down to a throb with each heartbeat, as if all his life forces rushed to that spot and clamored against his skull to be released. He stiffened, and sat straight.

"I guess you can stick on your horse now," said the man behind him.

The fellow left him at that. Lambert could see the heads and shoulders of men, the heads of horses, against the sky, as if they were below the river bank. He felt for his gun. No surprise was in store for him there; it was gone.

He was unable to mount when they brought

his horse. He attempted it, in confusion of senses that made it seem the struggle of somebody whom he watched and wanted to help, but could not. They lifted him, tied his feet under the horse, his hands to the saddle-horn. In this fashion they started away with him, one riding ahead, one on either hand. He believed that one or more came following, but of this he was not sure.

He knew it would be useless to make inquiry of their intentions. That would bring down on him derision, after their savage way. Stolidly as an Indian he rode among them to what end he could not imagine; but at the worst, he believed they would not go beyond some further torture of him to give him an initiation into what he must expect unless he accepted their decree that he quit the country forthwith.

As his senses cleared Lambert recognized the men beside him as Sim Hargus and the half-Indian, Tom. Behind him he believed Nick Hargus rode, making it a family party. In such hands, with such preliminary usage, it began to look very grave for him.

When they saw there was no danger of his

collapse, they began to increase their pace. Bound as he was, every step of the horse was increased torture to Lambert. He appealed to Sim Hargus to release his hands.

"You can tie them behind me if you're afraid," he suggested.

Hargus cursed him, refusing to ease his situation. Kerr turned on hearing this outburst and inquired what it meant. Hargus repeated the prisoner's request with obscene embellishment. They made no secret of each other's identity, speaking familiarly, as if in the presence of one who would make no future charges. Kerr found the request reasonable, and ordered Hargus to tie Lambert's hands at his back.

"I guess you might as well take your last ride comfortable, kid," Hargus commented, as he shifted the bonds.

They proceeded at a trot, keeping it up for two hours or more. Lambert knew it was about ten o'clock when he stopped to investigate the man in the road. There was a feel in the air now that told him it was far past the turn of night. He knew about where they were in relation to the ranch by this time, for a man who

lives in the open places develops his sense of direction until it serves him as a mole's in its underground tunneling.

There was no talking among his conductors, no sound but the tramp of the horses in unceasing trot, the scraping of the bushes on the stirrups as they passed. Lambert's legs were drawn close to his horse's belly, his feet not in the stirrups, and tied so tightly that he rode in painful rigidity. The brush caught the loose stirrups and flung them against Whetstone's sides, treatment that he resented with all the indignation of a genuine range horse. The twisting and jumping made Lambert's situation doubly uncomfortable. He longed for the end of the journey, no matter what awaited him at its conclusion.

For some time Lambert had noticed a glow as of a fire directly ahead of them. It grew and sank as if being fed irregularly, or as if smoke blew before it from time to time. Presently they rounded the base of a hill and came suddenly upon the fire, burning in a gulch, as it seemed, covering a large area, sending up a vast volume of smoke.

Lambert had seen smoke in this direction many times while riding fence, but could not account for it then any more than he could now for a little while as he stood facing its origin. Then he understood that this was a burning vein of lignite, such as he had seen traces of in the gorgeously colored soil in other parts of the Bad Lands where the fires had died out and cooled long ago.

These fires are peculiar to the Bad Lands, and not uncommon there, owing their origin to forest or prairie blazes which spread to the exposed veins of coal. As these broad, deep deposits of lignite lie near the surface, the fire can be seen through crevasses and fallen sections of crust. Sometimes they burn for years.

At the foot of the steep bank on which Lambert and his captors stood the crust had caved, giving the fire air to hasten its ravages. The mass of slow-moving fire glowed red and intense, covered in places by its own ashes, now sending up sudden clouds of smoke as an indraft of air livened the combustion, now smoldering in sullen dullness, throwing off a heat that made the horses draw back.

Kerr drew aside on arriving at the fire, and sat his horse looking at it, the light on his face. Sim Hargus pointed to the glowing pit.

"That's our little private hell. What do you think of it, kid?" he said, with his grunting, insulting sneer.

The fire was visible only in front of them, in a jagged, irregular strip marking the cave-in of the crust. It ranged from a yard to ten yards across, and appeared to extend on either hand a long distance. The bank on which Lambert's horse stood formed one shore of this fiery stream, which he estimated to be four yards or more across at that point. On the other side a recent settling of earth had exposed the coal, which was burning brightly in a fringe of red flame. Whether the fire underlay the ground beyond that point Lambert could not tell.

"Quite a sight by night, isn't it?" said Kerr. "It covers several acres," he explained, as if answering the speculation that rose, irrelevantly in the face of his pain, humiliation and anxiety, in Lambert's mind. What did it matter to him how much ground it covered, or when it began, or when it would die, when his own

life was as uncertain that minute as a match-flame in the wind.

Why had they brought him there to show him that burning coal-pit? Not out of any desire to display the natural wonders of the land. The answer was in the fact itself. Only the diabolism of a savage mind could contrive or countenance such barbarity as they had come to submit him to.

"I lost several head of stock down below here a little way last winter," said Kerr. "They crowded out over the fire in a blizzard and broke through. If a man was to ride in there through ignorance I doubt if he'd ever be able to get out."

Kerr sat looking speculatively into the glowing pit below, the firelight red over him in strong contrast of gleam and shadow. Sim Hargus leaned to look Lambert in the face.

"You said I was to consider the two days I give you was up," said he.

"You understood it right," Lambert told him.

Hargus drew back his fist. Kerr interposed, speaking sharply.

"You'll not hit a man with his arms tied while I'm around, Sim," he said.

"Let him loose, then — put him down before me on his feet!"

"Leave the kid alone," said Kerr, in his even, provoking voice. "I think he's the kind of a boy that will take friendly advice if you come up on the right side of him."

"Don't be all night about it," said Nick Hargus from his place behind Lambert, breaking silence in sullen voice.

Kerr rode up to Lambert and took hold of his reins, stroking old Whetstone's neck as if he didn't harbor an unkind thought for either man or beast.

"It's this way, Duke," he said. "You're a stranger here; the customs of this country are not the customs you're familiar with, and it's foolish, very foolish, and maybe dangerous, for you to try to change things around single-handed and alone. We've used you a little rougher than I intended the boys to handle you, but you'll get over it in a little while, and we're going to let you go this time.

"But we're going to turn you loose with the

warning once more to clear out of this country in as straight a line as you can draw, starting right now, and keeping on till you're out of the state. You'll excuse us if we keep your gun; you can send me your address when you land, and I'll ship it to you. We'll have to start you off tied up, too, much as I hate to do it. You'll find some way to get loose in a little while, I guess, a man that's as resourceful and original as you."

Tom Hargus had not said a word since they left the river. Now he leaned over and peered into Lambert's face with an expression of excited malevolence, his eyes glittering in the firelight, his nostrils flaring as if he drew exhilaration with every breath. He betrayed more of their intentions than Kerr had discovered in his words; so much, indeed, that Lambert's heart seemed to gush its blood and fall empty and cold.

Lambert forgot his throbbing head and tortured feet, and hands gorged with blood to the strain of bursting below his tight-drawn bonds. The realization of his hopeless situation rushed on him; he looked round him to seize even the

most doubtful opening that might lead him out of their hands.

There was no chance. He could not wheel his horse without hand on rein, no matter how well the willing beast obeyed the pressure of his knees while galloping in the open field.

He believed they intended to kill him and throw his body in the fire. Old Nick Hargus and his son had it in their power at last to take satisfaction for the humiliation to which he had bent them. A thousand regrets for his simplicity in falling into their trap came prickling him with their momentary torture, succeeded by wild gropings, frantic seekings, for some plan to get away.

He had no thought of making an appeal to them, no consideration of a surrender of his manhood by giving his promise to leave the country if they would set him free. He was afraid, as any healthy human is afraid when he stands before a danger that he can neither defend against nor assail. Sweat burst out on him; his heart labored and heaved in heavy strokes.

Whatever was passing in his mind, no trace

of it was betrayed in his bearing. He sat stiff and erect, the red glow of the intense fire on his face. His hat-brim was pressed back as the wind had held it in his ride, the scar of Jim Wilder's knife a shadow adding to the grim strength of his lean face. His bound arms drew his shoulders back, giving him a defiant pose.

"Take him out there and head him the right way, boys," Kerr directed.

Tom Hargus rode ahead, leading Whetstone by the reins. Kerr was not following. At Lambert's last sight of him he was still looking into the fire, as if fascinated by the sight of it.

A hundred yards or less from the fire they stopped. Tom Hargus turned Whetstone to face back the way they had come, threw the reins over the saddle-horn, rode up so close Lambert could feel his breath in his face.

"You made me brush off a nigger's hat when you had the drop on me, and carry a post five miles. That's the shoulder I carried it on!"

He drove his knife into Lambert's right shoulder with the words. The steel grated on bone.

"I brushed a nigger off under your gun one time," said old Nick Hargus, spurring up on the other side. "Now I'll brush you a little!"

Lambert felt the hot streak of a knife-blade in the thick muscle of his back. Almost at the same moment his horse leaped forward so suddenly that it wrenched every joint in his bound, stiff body, squealing in pain. He knew that one of them had plunged a knife in the animal's haunch. There was loud laughter, the sudden rushing of hooves, yells, and curses as they came after him.

But no shots. For a moment Lambert hoped that they were to content themselves with the tortures already inflicted and let him go, to find his way out to help or perish in his bonds, as it might fall. For a moment only, this hope. They came pressing after him, heading his horse directly toward the fire. He struggled to bring pressure to old Whetstone's ribs in the signal that he had answered a thousand times, but he was bound so rigidly that his muscles only twitched on the bone.

Whetstone galloped on, mad in the pain of his wound, heading straight toward the fire.

Lambert believed, as those who urged him on toward it believed, that no horseman ever rode could jump that fiery gorge. On the brink of it his pursuers would stop, while he, powerless to check or turn his horse, would plunge over to perish in his bonds, smothered under his struggling beast, pierced by the transcendent agonies of fire.

This was the last thought that rose coherently out of the turmoil of his senses as the firepit opened before his eyes. He heard his horse squeal again in the pain of another knife thrust to madden it to its destructive leap. Then a swirl of the confused senses as of released waters, the lift of his horse as it sprang, the heat of the fire in his face.

The healthy human mind recoils from death, and there is no agency among the destructive forces of nature which threatens with so much terror as fire. The senses disband in panic before it, reason flees, the voice appeals in its distress with a note that vibrates horror. In the threat of death by fire, man descends to his primal levels; his tongue speaks again the universal language, its note lending its horrified

thrill to the lowest thing that moves by the divine force of life.

As Lambert hung over the fire in that mighty leap, his soul recoiled. His strength rushed into one great cry, which still tore at his throat as his horse struck, racking him with a force that seemed to tear him joint from joint.

The shock of this landing gathered his dispersed faculties. There was fire around him, there was smoke in his nostrils, but he was alive. His horse was on its feet, struggling to scramble up the bank on which it had landed, the earth breaking under its hinder hoofs, threatening to precipitate it back into the fire that its tremendous leap had cleared.

CHAPTER XVI

WHETSTONE COMES HOME

LAMBERT saw the fire leaping around him, but felt no sting of its touch, keyed as he was in that swift moment of adjustment. From a man as dead he was transformed in a breath back to a living, panting, hoping, struggling being, strong in the tenacious purpose of life. He leaned over his horse's neck, shouting encouragement, speaking endearments to it as to a woman in travail.

There was silence on the bank behind him. Amazement over the leap that had carried Whetstone across the place which they had designed for the grave of both man and horse, held the four scoundrels breathless for a spell. Fascinated by the heroic animal's fight to draw himself clear of the fire which wrapped his hinder quarters, they forgot to shoot.

A heave, a lurching struggle, a groan as if his heart burst in the terrific strain, and Whetstone

lunged up the bank, staggered from his knees, snorted the smoke out of his nostrils, gathered his feet under him, and was away like a bullet. The sound of shots broke from the bank across the fiery crevassé; bullets came so close to Lambert that he lay flat against his horse's neck.

As the gallant creature ran, sensible of his responsibilities for his master's life, it seemed, Lambert spoke to him encouragingly, proud of the tremendous thing that he had done. There was no sound of pursuit, but the shooting had stopped. Lambert knew they would follow as quickly as they could ride round the field of fire.

After going to this length, they could not allow him to escape. There would have been nothing to explain to any living man with him and all trace of him obliterated in the fire, but with him alive and fleeing, saved by the winged leap of his splendid horse, they would be called to answer, man by man.

Whetstone did not appear to be badly hurt. He was stretching away like a hare, shaping his course toward the ranch as true as a pigeon. If they overtook him they would have to ride

harder than they ever rode in their profitless lives before.

Lambert estimated the distance between the place where they had trapped him and the fire as fifteen miles. It must be nine or ten miles across to the Philbrook ranch, in the straightest line that a horse could follow, and from that point many miles more to the ranchhouse and release from his stifling ropes. The fence would be no security against his pursuing enemies, but it would look like the boundary of hope.

Whether they lost so much time in getting around the fire that they missed him, or whether they gave it up after a trial of speed against Whetstone, Lambert never knew. He supposed that their belief was that neither man nor horse would live to come into the sight of men again. However it fell, they did not approach within hearing if they followed, and were not in sight as dawn broke and broadened into day.

Whetstone made the fence without slackening his speed. There Lambert checked him with a word and looked back for his enemies. Finding that they were not near, he proceeded along the fence at easier gait, holding the animal's

strength for the final heat, if they should make a sudden appearance. Somewhere along that miserable ride, after daylight had broken and the pieced wire that Grace Kerr had cut had been passed, Lambert fell unconscious across the horn of his saddle from the drain of blood from his wounds and the unendurable pain of his bonds.

In this manner the horse came bearing him home at sunrise. Taterleg was away on his beat, not uneasy over Lambert's absence. It was the exception for him to spend a night in the bunkhouse in that summer weather. So old Whetstone, jaded, scorched, bloody from his own and his master's wounds, was obliged to stand at the gate and whinny for help when he arrived.

It was hours afterward that the fence rider opened his eyes and saw Vesta Philbrook, and closed them again, believing it was a delirium of his pain. Then Taterleg spoke on the other side of the bed, and he knew that he had come through his perils into gentle hands.

"How're you feelin', old sport?" Taterleg inquired with anxious tenderness.

Lambert turned his head toward the voice and grinned a little, in the teeth-baring, hard-pulling way of a man who has withstood a great deal more than the human body and mind ever were designed to undergo. He thought he spoke to Taterleg; the words shaped on his tongue, his throat moved. But there was such a roaring in his ears, like the sound of a train crossing a trestle, that he could not hear his own voice.

"Sure," said Taterleg, hopefully, "you're all right, ain't you, old sport?"

"Fine," said Lambert, hearing his voice small and dry, strange as the voice of a man to him unknown.

Vesta put her arm under his head, lifted him a little, gave him a swallow of water. It helped, or something helped. Perhaps it was the sympathetic tenderness of her good, honest eyes. He paid her with another little grin, which hurt her more to see than him to give, wrenched even though it was from the bottom of his soul.

"How's old Whetstone?" he asked, his voice coming clearer.

"He's all right," she told him.

"His tail's burnt off of him, mostly, and he's

cut in the hams in a couple of places, but he ain't hurt any, as I can see," Taterleg said, with more truth than diplomacy.

Lambert struggled to his elbow, the consciousness of what seemed his ingratitude to this dumb savior of his life smiting him with shame.

"I must go and attend to him," he said.

Vesta and Taterleg laid hands on him at once.

"You'll bust them stitches I took in your back if you don't keep still, young feller," Taterleg warned. "Whetstone ain't as bad off as you, nor half as bad."

Lambert noticed then that his hands were wrapped in wet towels.

"Burned?" he inquired, lifting his eyes to Vesta's face.

"No, just swollen and inflamed. They'll be all right in a little while."

"I blundered into their hands like a blind kitten," said he, reproachfully.

"They'll eat lead for it!" said Taterleg.

"It was Kerr and that gang," Lambert explained, not wanting to leave any doubt behind if he should have to go.

"You can tell us after a while," she said, with compassionate tenderness.

"Sure," said Taterleg, cheerfully, "you lay back there and take it easy. I'll keep my eye on things."

That evening, when the pain had eased out of his head, Lambert told Vesta what he had gone through, sparing nothing of the curiosity that had led him, like a calf, into their hands. He passed briefly over their attempt to herd him into the fire, except to give Whetstone the hero's part, as he so well deserved.

Vesta sat beside him, hearing him to the end of the brief recital that he made of it in silence, her face white, her figure erect. When he finished she laid her hand on his forehead, as if in tribute to the manhood that had borne him through such inhuman torture, and the loyalty that had been the cause of its visitation. Then she went to the window, where she stood a long time looking over the sad sweep of broken country, the fringe of twilight on it in somber shadow.

It was not so dark when she returned to her place at his bedside, but he could see that she

had been weeping in the silent pain that rises like a poison distillation from the heart.

"It draws the best into it and breaks them," she said in great bitterness, speaking as to herself. "It isn't worth the price!"

"Never mind it, Vesta," he soothed, putting out his hand. She took it between her own, and held it, and a great comfort came to him in her touch.

"I'm going to sell the cattle as fast as I can move them, and give it up, Duke," she said, calling him by that name with the easy unconsciousness of a familiar habit, although she never had addressed him so before.

"You're not going away from here whipped, Vesta," he said with a firmness that gave new hope and courage to her sad heart. "I'll be out of this in a day or two, then we'll see about it — about several things. You're not going to leave this country whipped; neither am I."

She sat in meditation, her face to the window, presenting the soft turn of her cheek and chin to Lambert's view. She was too fine and good for that country, he thought, too good for the best that it ever could offer or give, no mat-

ter how generously the future might atone for the hardships of the past. It would be better for her to leave it, he wanted her to leave it, but not with her handsome head bowed in defeat.

"I think if you were to sift the earth and screen out its meanest, they wouldn't be a match for the people around here," she said. "There wouldn't be a bit of use taking this outrage up with the authorities; Kerr and his gang would say it was a joke, and get away with it, too."

"I wouldn't go squealing to the county authorities, Vesta, even if I knew I'd get results. This is something a man has to square for himself. Maybe they intended it for a joke, too, but it was a little rougher than I'm used to."

"There's no doubt what their intention was. You can understand my feelings toward them now, Duke; maybe I'll not seem such a savage."

"I've got a case with you against them all, Vesta."

He made no mental reservation as he spoke; there was no pleading for exception in Grace Kerr's dark eyes that he could grant. Long as he had nestled the romance between them in his breast, long as he had looked into the West

and sent his dream out after her, he could not, in this sore hour, forgive her the taint of her blood.

He felt that all tenderness in him toward any of her name was dead. It had been a pretty fancy to hold, that thought of finding her, but she was only swamp-fire that had lured him to the door of hell. Still the marvel of his meeting her, the violet scent of his old dream, lingered sweetly with him like the perfume that remains after a beautiful woman whose presence has illuminated a room. So hard does romance die.

"I think I'll have to break my word to you and buckle on my gun again for a little while," she said. "Mr. Wilson can't ride the fence alone, capable and willing as he is, and ready to go day and night."

"Leave it to him till I'm out again, Vesta; that will only be a day or two ——"

"A day or two! Three or four weeks, if you do well."

"No, not that long, not anything like that long," he denied with certainty. "They didn't hurt me very much."

"Well, if they didn't hurt you much they damaged you considerably."

He grinned over the serious distinction that she made between the words. Then he thought, pleasantly, that Vesta's voice seemed fitted to her lips like the tone of some beautiful instrument. It was even and soft, slow and soothing, as her manner was deliberate and well calculated, her presence a comfort to the eye and the mind alike.

An exceptional combination of a girl, he reflected, speculating on what sort of man would marry her. Whoever he was, whatever he might be, he would be only secondary to her all through the compact. That chap would come walking a little way behind her all the time, with a contented eye and a certain pride in his situation. It was a diverting fancy as he lay there in the darkening room, Vesta coming down the years a strong, handsome, proud figure in the foreground, that man just far enough behind her to give the impression as he passed that he belonged to her *entourage*, but never quite overtaking her.

Even so, the world might well envy the man

his position. Still, if a man should happen along who could take the lead — but Vesta wouldn't have him; she wouldn't surrender. It might cost her pain to go her way with her pretty head up, her eyes on the road far beyond, but she would go alone and hide her pain rather than surrender. That would be Vesta Philbrook's way.

Myrtle, the negro woman, came in with chicken broth. Vesta made a light for him to sup by, protesting when he would sit up to help himself, the spoon impalpable in his numb fingers, still swollen and purple from the long constriction of his bonds.

Next morning Vesta came in arrayed in her riding habit, her sombrero on, as she had appeared the first time he saw her. Only she was so much lovelier now, with the light of friendship and tender concern in her face, that he was gladdened by her presence in the door. It was as of a sudden burst of music, or the voice of someone for whom the heart is sick.

He was perfectly fine, he told her, although he was as sore as a burn. In about two days he would be in the saddle again; she didn't

need to bother about riding fence, it would be all right, he knew. His declaration didn't carry assurance. He could see that by the changing cast of her face, as sensitive as still water to a breathing wind.

She was wearing her pistol, and appeared very competent with it on her hip, and very high-bred and above that station of contention and strife. He was troubled not a little at sight of her thus prepared to take up the battles which she had renounced and surrendered into his hands only yesterday. She must have read it in his eyes.

"I'm only going to watch the fence and repair it to keep the cattle in if they cut it," she said. "I'll not take the offensive, even if I see her — them cutting it; I'll only act on the defensive, in any case. I promise you that, Duke."

She left him with that promise, before he could commend her on the wisdom of her resolution, or set her right on the matter of Grace Kerr. From the way Vesta spoke, a man would think she believed he had some tender feeling for that wild girl, and the idea of it was so

preposterous that he felt his face grow hot.

He was uneasy for Vesta that day, in spite of her promise to avoid trouble, and fretted a good deal over his incapacitated state. His shoulder burned where Tom Hargus' knife had scraped the bone, his wounded back was stiff.

Without this bodily suffering he would have been miserable, for he had the sweat of his humiliation to wallow in, the black cloud of his contemplated vengeance across his mind in ever-deepening shadow. On his day of reckoning he cogitated long, planning how he was to bring it about. The law would not justify him in going out to seek these men and shooting them down where overtaken. Time and circumstance must be ready to his hand before he could strike and wipe out that disgraceful score.

It was not to be believed that they would allow the matter to stand where it was; that was a comforting thought. They would seek occasion to renew the trouble, and push it to their desired conclusion. That was the day to which he looked forward in hot eagerness. Never again would he be taken like a rabbit in a trap. He

felt that, to stand clear before the law, he would have to wait for them to push their fight on him, but he vowed they never would find him unprepared, asleep or awake, under roof or under sky.

He would get Taterleg to oil up a pair of pistols from among the number around the bunkhouse and leave them with him that night. There was satisfaction in the anticipation of these preparations. Dwelling on them he fell asleep. He woke late in the afternoon, when the sun was yellow on the wall, the shadow of the cottonwood leaves quivering like dragonflies' wings.

On the little table beside his bed, near his glass, a bit of white paper lay. He looked at it curiously. It bore writing in ink and marks as of a pin.

Just to say hello, Duke.

That was the message, unsigned, folded as it had been pinned to the wire. Vesta had brought it and left it there while he slept.

He drew himself up with stiff carefulness and read it again, holding it in his fingers then

and gazing in abstraction out of the window, through which he could pick up the landscape across the river, missing the brink of the mesa entirely.

A softness, as of the rebirth of his old romance, swept him, submerging the bitter thoughts and vengeful plans which had been his but a few hours before, the lees of which were still heavy in him. This little piece of writing proved that Grace was innocent of anything that had befallen him. In the friendly goodwill of her heart she thought him, as she doubtless wished him, unharmed and well.

There was something in that girl better than her connections would seem to guarantee; she was not intractable, she was not beyond the influence of generosity, nor deaf to the argument of honor. It would be unfair to hold her birth and relationship against her. Nobility had sprung out of baseness many times in the painful history of human progress. If she was vengeful and vindictive, it was what the country had made her. She should not be judged for this in measure harsher than Vesta Philbrook should be judged. The acts of both

were controlled by what they believed to be the right.

Perhaps, and who knows, and why not? So, a train of dreams starting and blowing from him, like smoke from a censer, perfumed smoke, purging the place of demons which confuse the lines of men's and women's lives and set them counter where they should go in amity, warm hand in warm hand, side by side.

CHAPTER XVII

HOW THICK IS BLOOD?

NO STERNER figure ever rode the Bad Lands than Jeremiah Lambert appeared eight days after his escape out of his enemies' hands. The last five days of his internment he had spent in his own quarters, protesting to Vesta that he was no longer an invalid, and that further receipt of her tender ministrations would amount to obtaining a valuable consideration by false pretense.

This morning as he rode about his duty the scar left by Jim Wilder's knife in his cheek never had appeared so prominent. It cast over all his face a shadow of grimness, and imparted to it an aged and seasoned appearance not warranted by either his experience or his years. Although he had not carried any superfluous flesh before his night of torture, he was lighter now by many pounds.

Not a handsome man that day, not much about

him to recall the red-faced, full-blooded agent of the All-in-One who had pushed his bicycle into the Syndicate camp that night, guided by Taterleg's song. But there was a look of confidence in his eyes that had not been his in those days, which he considered now as far distant and embryonic; there was a certainty in his hand that made him a man in a man's place anywhere in the extreme exactions of that land.

Vesta was firm in her intention of giving up the ranch and leaving the Bad Lands as soon as she could sell the cattle. With that program ahead of him, Lambert was going this morning to look over the herd and estimate the number of cattle ready for market, that he might place his order for cars.

He didn't question the wisdom of reducing the herd, for that was good business; but it hurt him to have Vesta leave there with drooping feathers, acknowledging to the brutal forces which had opposed the ranch so long that she was beaten. He would have her go after victory over them, for it was no place for Vesta. But he would like for her to stay until he had

broken their opposition, and compelled them to take off their hats to her fence.

He swore as he rode this morning that he would do it. Vesta should not clean out the cattle, lock the lonesome ranchhouse, abandon the barns and that vast investment of money to the skulking wolves who waited only such a retreat to sneak in and despoil the place. He had fixed in his mind the intention, firm as a rock in the desert that defied storm and disintegration, to bring every man of that gang up to the wire fence in his turn and bend him before it, or break him if he would not bend.

This accomplished, the right of the fence established on such terms that it would be respected evermore, Vesta might go, if she desired. Surely it would be better for her, a pearl in those dark waters where her beauty would corrode and her soul would suffer in the isolation too hard for one of her fine harmony to bear. Perhaps she would turn the ranch over to him to run, with a band of sheep which he could handle and increase on shares, after the custom of that business, to the profit of both.

He had speculated on this eventuality not a

little during the days of his enforced idleness. This morning the thought was so strong in him that it amounted almost to a plan. Maybe there was a face in these calculations, a face illumined by clear, dark eyes, which seemed to strain over the brink of the future and beckon him on. Blood might stand between them, and differences almost irreconcilable, but the face withdrew never.

It was evening before he worked through the herd and made it round to the place where Grace Kerr had cut the fence. There was no message for him. Without foundation for his disappointment, he was disappointed. He wondered if she had been there, and bent in his saddle to examine the ground across the fence.

There were tracks of a horse, but whether old or new he was not educated enough yet in rangecraft to tell. He looked toward the hill from which he had watched her ride to cut the fence, hoping she might appear. He knew that this hope was traitorous to his employer, he felt that his desire toward this girl was unworthy, but he wanted to see her and hear her speak.

Foolish, also, to yield to that desire to let

down the fence where he had hooked the wire and ride out to see if he could find her. Still, there was so little probability of seeing her that he was not ashamed, only for the twinge of a disloyal act, as he rode toward the hill, his long shadow ambling beside him, a giant horseman on a mammoth steed.

He returned from this little sentimental excursion feeling somewhat like a sneak. The country was empty of Grace Kerr. In going out to seek her in the folly of a romance too trivial for a man of his serious mien, he was guilty of an indiscretion deserving Vesta Philbrook's deepest scorn. He burned with his own shame as he dismounted to adjust the wire, like one caught in a reprehensible deed, and rode home feeling foolishly small. Kerr! He should hate the name.

But when he came to shaving by lamplight that night, and lifted out his pied calfskin vest to find his strop, the little handkerchief brought all the old remembrances, the old tenderness, back in a sentimental flood. He fancied there was still a fragrance of violet perfume about it as he held it tenderly and pressed it to his

cheek after a furtive glance around. He folded it small, put it in a pocket of the garment, which he hung on the foot of his bed.

An inspiration directed the act. Tomorrow he would ride forth clothed in the calfskin vest, with the bright handkerchief that he had worn on the Sunday at Misery when he won Grace Kerr's scented trophy. For sentimental reasons only; purely sentimental reasons.

No, he was not a handsome man any longer, he confessed, grinning at the admission, rather pleased to have it as it was. That scar gave him a cast of ferocity which his heart did not warrant, for, inwardly, he said, he knew he was as gentle as a dove. But if there was any doubt in her mind, granted that he had changed a good deal since she first saw him, the calfskin vest and the handkerchief would settle it. By those signs she would know him, if she had doubted before.

Not that she had doubted. As her anger and fear of him had passed that morning, recognition had come, and with recognition, confidence. He would take a look out that way in the morning. Surely a man had a right to go into the

enemy's country and get a line on what was going on against him. So as he shaved he planned, arguing loudly for himself to drown the cry of treason that his conscience raised.

Tomorrow he would take a further look through the herd and conclude his estimate. Then he'd have to go to Glendora and order cars for the first shipment. Vesta wouldn't be able to get all of them off for many weeks. It would mean several trips to Chicago for him, with a crew of men to take care of the cattle along the road. It might be well along into the early fall before he had them thinned down to calves and cows not ready for market.

He shaved and smoothed his weathered face, turning his eyes now and again to his hairy vest with a feeling of affection in him for the garment that neither its worth nor its beauty warranted. Sentimental reasons always outweigh sensible ones as long as a man is young.

He rode along the fence next morning on his way to the herd, debating whether he should leave a note on the wire. He was not in such a soft and sentimental mood this morning, for sense had rallied to him and pointed out the im-

possibility of harmony between himself and one so nearly related to a man who had attempted to burn him alive. It seemed to him now that the recollection of those poignant moments would rise to stand between them, no matter how gentle or far removed from the source of her being she might appear.

These gloomy speculations rose and left him like a flock of somber birds as he lifted the slope. Grace Kerr herself was riding homeward, just mounting the hill over which she must pass in a moment and disappear. He unhooked the wire and rode after her. At the hilltop she stopped, unaware of his coming, and looked back. He waved his hat; she waited.

"Have you been sick, Duke?" she inquired, after greetings, looking him over with concern.

"My horse bit me," said he, passing it off with that old stock pleasantry of the range, which covered anything and everything that a man didn't want to explain.

"I missed you along here," she said. She swept him again with that slow, puzzled look of inquiry, her eyes coming back to his face in a

frank, unembarrassed stare. "Oh, I know what it is now! You're dressed like you were that day at Misery. I couldn't make it out for a minute."

She was not wearing her mannish garb this morning, but divided skirts of corduroy and a white waist with a bit of bright color at the neck. Her white sombrero was the only masculine touch about her, and that rather added to her quick, dark prettiness.

"You were wearing a white waist the first time I saw you," he said.

"This one," she replied, touching it with simple motion of full identification.

Neither of them mentioned the mutual recognition on the day she had been caught cutting the fence. They talked of commonplace things, as youth is constrained to do when its heart and mind are centered on something else which burns within it, the flame of which it cannot cover from any eyes but its own. Life on the range, its social disadvantages, its rough diversions, these they spoke of, Lambert's lips dry with his eagerness to tell her more.

How quickly it had laid hold of him again

at sight of her, this unreasonable longing! The perfume of his romance suffused her, purging away all that was unworthy.

"I trembled every second that day for fear your horse would break through the platform and throw you," she said, suddenly coming back to the subject that he wanted most to discuss.

"I didn't think of it till a good while afterward," he said in slow reflection.

"I didn't suppose I'd ever see you again, and, of course, I never once thought you were the famous Duke of Chimney Butte I heard so much about when I got home."

"More notorious than famous, I'm afraid, Miss Kerr."

"Jim Wilder used to work for us; I knew him well."

Lambert bent his head, a shadow of deepest gravity falling like a cloud over the animation which had brightened his features but a moment before. He sat in contemplative silence a little while, his voice low when he spoke.

"Even though he deserved it, I've always been sorry it happened."

"Well, if you're sorry, I guess you're the

only one. Jim was a bad kid. Where's that horse you raced the train on? ''

'' I'm resting him up a little.''

'' You had him out here the other day.''

'' Yes. I crippled him up a little since then.''

'' I'd like to have that horse. Do you want to sell him, Duke? ''

'' There's not money enough made to buy him! '' Lambert returned, lifting his head quickly, looking her in the eyes so directly that she colored, and turned her head to cover her confusion.

'' You must think a lot of him when you talk like that.''

'' He's done me more than one good turn, Miss Kerr,'' he explained, feeling that she must have read his harsh thoughts. '' He saved my life only a week ago. But that's likely to happen to any man,'' he added quickly, making light of it.

'' Saved your life? '' said she, turning her clear, inquiring eyes on him again in that expression of wonder that was so vast in them. '' How did he save your life, Duke? ''

'' I guess I was just talking,'' said he, wish-

ing he had kept a better hold on his tongue. "You know we have a fool way of saying a man's life was saved in very trivial things. I've known people to declare that a drink of whisky did that for them."

She lifted her brows as she studied his face openly and with such a directness that he flushed in confusion, then turned her eyes away slowly.

"I liked him that day he outran the flier; I've often thought of him since then."

Lambert looked off over the wild landscape, the distant buttes softened in the haze that seemed to presage the advance of autumn, considering much. When he looked into her face again it was with the harshness gone out of his eyes.

"I wouldn't sell that horse to any man, but I'd give him to you, Grace."

She started a little when he pronounced her name, wondering, perhaps, how he knew it, her eyes growing great in the pleasure of his generous declaration. She urged her horse nearer with an impetuous movement and gave him her hand.

"I didn't mean for you to take it that way, Duke, but I appreciate it more than I can tell you."

Her eyes were earnest and soft with a mist of gratitude that seemed to rise out of her heart. He held her hand a moment, feeling that he was being drawn nearer to her lips, as if he must touch them, and rise refreshed to face the labors of his life.

"I started out on him to look for you, expecting to ride him to the Pacific, and maybe double back. I didn't know where I'd have to go, but I intended to go on till I found you."

"It seemed almost a joke," she said, "that we were so near each other and you didn't know it."

She laughed, not seeming to feel the seriousness of it as he felt it. It is the woman who laughs always in these little life-comedies of ours.

"I'll give him to you, Grace, when he picks up again. Any other horse will do me now. He carried me to the end of my road; he brought me to you."

She turned her head, and he hadn't the cour-

age in him to look and see whether it was to hide a smile.

"You don't know me, Duke; maybe you wouldn't — maybe you'll regret you ever started out to find me at all."

His courage came up again; he leaned a little nearer, laying his hand on hers where it rested on her saddle-horn.

"You wanted me to come, didn't you, Grace?"

"I hoped you might come sometime, Duke."

He rode with her when she set out to return home to the little valley where he had interposed to prevent a tragedy between her and Vesta Philbrook. Neither of them spoke of that encounter. It was avoided in silence as a thing of which both were ashamed.

"Will you be over this way again, Grace?" he asked when he stopped to part.

"I expect I will, Duke."

"Tomorrow, do you think?"

"Not tomorrow," shaking her head in the pretty way she had of doing it when she spoke in negation, like an earnest child.

"Maybe the next day?"

"I expect I may come then, Duke — or what is your real name?"

"Jeremiah. Jerry, if you like it better."

She pursed her lips in comical seriousness, frowning a little as if considering it weightily. Then she looked at him in frank comradeship, her dark eyes serious, nodding her head.

"I'll just call you Duke."

He left her with the feeling that he had known her many years. Blood between them? What was blood? Thicker than water? Nay, impalpable as smoke.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RIVALRY OF COOKS

TATERLEG said that he would go to Glendora that night with Lambert, when the latter announced he was going down to order cars for the first shipment of cattle.

"I've been layin' off to go quite a while," Taterleg said, "but that scrape you run into kind of held me around nights. You know, that feller he put a letter in the post office for me, servin' notice I was to keep away from that girl. I guess he thinks he's got me buffaloed and on the run."

"Which one of them sent you a letter?"

"Jedlick, dern him. I'm goin' down there from now on every chance I get and set up to that girl like a Dutch uncle."

"What do you suppose Jedlick intends to do to you?"

"I don't care what he aims to do. If he makes a break at me, I'll lay him on a board,

if they can find one in the Bad Lands long enough to hold him."

"He's got a bad eye, a regular mule eye. You'd better step easy around him and not stir him up too quick."

Lambert had no faith in the valor of Jedlick at all, but Taterleg would fight, as he very well knew. But he doubted whether there was any great chance of the two coming together with Alta Wood on the watch between them. She'd pat one and she'd rub the other, soothing them and drawing them off until they forgot their wrath. Still, he did not want Taterleg to be running any chance at all of making trouble.

"You'd better let me take your gun," he suggested as they approached the hotel.

"I can take care of it," Taterleg returned, a bit hurt by the suggestion, lofty and distant in his declaration.

"No harm intended, old feller. I just didn't want you to go pepperin' old Jedlick over a girl that's as fickle as you say Alta Wood is."

"I ain't a-goin' to pull a gun on no man till he gives me a good reason, Duke, but if he *gives* me the reason, I want to be heeled. I guess I

was a little hard on Alta that time, because I was a little sore. She's not so foolish fickle as some."

"When she's trying to hold three men in line at once it looks to me she must be playin' two of 'em for suckers. But go to it, go to it, old feller; don't let me scare you off."

"I never had but one little fallin' out with Alta, and that was the time I was sore. She wanted me to cut off my mustache, and I told her I wouldn't do that for no girl that ever punched a piller."

"What did she want you to do that for, do you reckon?"

"Curiosity, Duke, plain curiosity. She worked old Jedlick that way, but she couldn't throw me. Wanted to see how it'd change me, she said. Well, I know, without no experimentin'."

"I don't know that it'd hurt you much to lose it, Taterleg."

"Hurt me? I'd look like one of them flat Christmas toys they make out of tin without that mustache, Duke. I'd be so sharp in the face I'd whistle in the wind every time my horse

went out of a walk. I'm a-goin' to wear that mustache to my grave, and no woman that ever hung her stockin's out of the winder to dry's goin' to fool me into cuttin' it off."

"You know when you're comfortable, old feller. Stick to it, if that's the way you feel about it."

They hitched at the hotel rack. Taterleg said he'd go on to the depot with Lambert.

"I'm lookin' for a package of express goods I sent away to Chicago for," he explained.

The package was on hand, according to expectation. It proved to be a five-pound box of chewing gum, "All kinds and all flavors," Taterleg said.

"You've got enough there to stick you to her so tight that even death can't part you," Lambert told him.

Taterleg winked as he worked undoing the cords.

"Only thing can beat it, Duke — money. Money can beat it, but a man's got to have a lick or two of common sense to go with it, and some good looks on the side, if he picks off a girl as wise as Alta. When Jedlick was weak

enough to cut off his mustache, he killed his chance."

"Is he in town tonight, do you reckon?"

"I seen his horse in front of the saloon. Well, no girl can say I ever went and set down by her smellin' like a bunghole on a hot day. I don't travel that road. I'll go over there smellin' like a fruit-store, and I'll put that box in her hand and tell her to chaw till she goes to sleep, an then I'll pull her head over on my shoulder and pat them bangs. Hursh, oh, hursh!"

It seemed that the effervescent fellow could not be wholly serious about anything. Lambert was not certain that he was serious in his attitude toward Jedlick as he went away with his sweet-scented box under his arm.

By the time Lambert had finished his arrangements for a special train to carry the first heavy shipment of the Philbrook herd to market it was long after dark. He was in the post office when he heard the shot that, he feared, opened hostilities between Taterleg and Jedlick. He hurried out with the rest of the customers and went toward the hotel.

There was some commotion on the hotel porch, which it was too dark to follow, but he heard Alta scream, after which there came another shot. The bullet struck the side of the store, high above Lambert's head.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SENTINEL

THERE appeared in the light of the hotel door for a moment the figures of struggling men, followed by the sound of feet in flight down the steps, and somebody mounting a horse in haste at the hotel hitching-rack. Whoever this was rode away at a hard gallop.

Lambert knew that the battle was over, and as he came to the hitching-rack he saw that Taterleg's horse was still there. So he had not fled. Several voices sounded from the porch in excited talk, among them Taterleg's, proving that he was sound and untouched.

His uneasiness gone, Lambert stood a little while in front, well out in the dark, trying to pick up what was being said, but with little result, for people were arriving with noise of heavy boots to learn the cause of the disturbance.

Taterleg held the floor for a little while, his

voice severe as if he laid down the law. Alta replied in what appeared to be indignant protest, then fell to crying. There was a picture of her in the door a moment being led inside by her mother, blubbering into her hands. The door slammed after them, and Taterleg was heard to say in loud, firm voice:

"Don't approach me, I tell you! I'd hit a blind woman as quick as I would a one-armed man!"

Lambert felt that this was the place to interfere. He called Taterleg.

"All right, Duke; I'm a-comin'," Taterleg answered.

The door opened, revealing the one-armed proprietor entering the house; revealing a group of men and women, bare-headed, as they had rushed to the hotel at the sound of the shooting; revealing Taterleg coming down the steps, his box of chewing gum under his arm.

Wood fastened the door back in its accustomed anchorage. His neighbors closed round where he stood explaining the affair, his stump of arm lifting and pointing in the expressionless gestures common to a man thus maimed.

"Are you hurt?" Lambert inquired.

"No, I ain't hurt none, Duke."

Taterleg got aboard of his horse with nothing more asked of him or volunteered on his part. They had not proceeded far when his indignation broke bounds.

"I ain't hurt, but I'm swinged like a fool miller moth in a lamp chimley," he complained.

"Who was that shootin' around so darned careless?"

"Jedlick, dern him!"

"It's a wonder he didn't kill somebody upstairs somewhere."

"First shot he hit a box of t'backer back of Wood's counter. I don't know what he hit the second time, but it wasn't me."

"He hit the side of the store."

Taterleg rode along in silence a little way. "Well, that was purty good for him," he said.

"Who was that hopped a horse like he was goin' for the doctor, and tore off?"

"Jedlick, dern him!"

Lambert allowed the matter to rest at that, knowing that neither of them had been hurt. Taterleg would come to the telling of it before

long, not being built so that he could hold a piece of news like that without suffering great discomfort.

"I'm through with that bunch down there," he said in the tone of deep, disgustful renunciation. "I never was led on and soaked that way before in my life. No, I ain't hurt, Duke, but it ain't no fault of that girl I ain't. She done all she could to kill me off."

"Who started it?"

"Well, I'll give it to you straight, Duke, from the first word, and you can judge for yourself what kind of a woman that girl's goin' to turn out to be. I never would 'a' believed she'd 'a' throwed a man that way, but you can't read 'em, Duke; no man can read 'em."

"I guess that's right," Lambert allowed, wondering how far he had read in certain dark eyes which seemed as innocent as a child's.

"It's past the power of any man to do it. Well, you know, I went over there with my fresh box of gum, all of the fruit flavors you can name, and me and her we set out on the porch gabbin' and samplin' that gum. She never was so leanin' and lovin' before, settin' up so clost

to me you couldn't 'a' put a sheet of writin' paper between us. Shucks!"

"Rubbin' the paint off, Taterleg. You ought 'a' took the tip that she was about done with you."

"You're right; I would 'a' if I'd 'a' had as much brains as a ant. Well, she told me Jedlick was layin' for me, and begged me not to hurt him, for she didn't want to see me go to jail on account of a feller like him. She talked to me like a Dutch uncle, and put her head so clost I could feel them bangs a ticklin' my ear. But that's done with; she can tickle all the ears she wants to tickle, but she'll never tickle mine no more. And all the time she was talkin' to me like that, where do you reckon that Jedlick feller was at?"

"In the saloon, I guess, firin' up."

"No, he wasn't, Duke. He was settin' right in that *ho*-tel, with his old flat feet under the table, shovelin' in pie. He come out pickin' his teeth purty soon, standin' there by the door, dern him, like he owned the dump. Well, he may, for all I know. Alta she inched away from me, and she says to him: 'Mr. Jedlick,

come over here and shake hands with Mr. Wilson.'

"'Yes,' he says, 'I'll shake insect powder on his grave!'

"'I see you doin' it,' I says, 'you long-hungry and half-full! If you ever make a pass at me you'll swaller wind so fast you'll bust.' Well, he begun to shuffle and prance and cut up like a boy makin' faces, and there's where Alta she ducked in through the parlor winder. 'Don't hurt him, Mr. Jedlick,' she says; 'please don't hurt him!'

"'I'll chaw him up as fine as cat hair and blow him out through my teeth,' Jedlick told her. And there's where I started after that feller. He was standin' in front of the door all the time, where he could duck inside if he saw me comin', and I guess he would 'a' ducked if Wood hadn't 'a' been there. When he saw Wood, old Jedlick pulled his gun.

"I slung down on him time enough to blow him in two, and pulled on my trigger, not aimin' to hurt the old sooner, only to snap a bullet between his toes, but she wouldn't work. Old Jedlick he was so rattled at the sight of that

gun in my hand he banged loose, slap through the winder into that box of plug back of the counter. I pulled on her and pulled on her, but she wouldn't snap, and I was yankin' at the hammer to cock her when he tore loose with that second shot. That's when I found out what the matter was with that old gun of mine."

Taterleg was so moved at this passage that he seemed to run out of words. He rode along in silence until they reached the top of the hill, and the house on the mesa stood before them, dark and lonesome. Then he pulled out his gun and handed it across to the Duke.

"Run your thumb over the hammer of that gun, Duke," he said.

"Well! What in the world — it feels like chewin' gum, Taterleg."

"It *is* chewin' gum, Duke. A wad of it as big as my fist gluin' down the hammer of that gun. That girl put it on there, Duke. She knew Jedlick wouldn't have no more show before me, man to man, than a rabbit. She done me that trick, Duke; she wanted to kill me off."

"There wasn't no joke about that, old feller," the Duke said seriously, grateful that the

girl's trick had not resulted in any greater damage to his friend than the shock to his dignity and simple heart.

"Yes, and it was my own gum. That's the worst part of it, Duke; she wasn't even usin' his gum, dang her melts!"

"She must have favored Jedlick pretty strong to go that far."

"Well, if she wants him after what she's saw of him, she can take him. I clinched him before he could waste any more ammunition, and twisted his gun away from him. I jolted him a couple of jolts with my fist, and he broke and run. You seen him hop his horse."

"What did you do with his gun?"

"I walked over to the winder where that girl was lookin' out to see Jedlick wipe up the porch with me, and I handed her the gun, and I says: 'Give this to Mr. Jedlick with my regards,' I says, 'and tell him if he wants any more to send me word.' Well, she come out, and I called her on what she done to my gun. She swore she didn't mean it for nothin' but a joke. I said if that was her idear of a joke, the quicker we parted the sooner. She began to bawl, and the

old man and old woman put in, and I'd 'a' slapped that feller, Duke, if he'd 'a' had two arms on him. But you can't slap a half of a man."

"I guess that's right."

"I walked up to that girl, and I said: 'You've chawed the last wad of my gum you'll ever plaster up ag'in' your old lean jawbone. You may be some figger in Glendora,' I says, 'but anywheres else you wouldn't cut no more ice than a cracker.' Wood he took it up ag'in. That's when I come away."

"It looks like it's all off between you and Alta now."

"Broke off, short up to the handle. Serves a feller right for bein' a fool. I might 'a' knowed when she wanted me to shave my mustache off she didn't have no more heart in her than a fish."

"That was askin' a lot of a man, sure as the world."

"No man can look two ways at once without somebody puttin' something down his back, Duke."

"Referrin' to the lady in Wyoming. Sure."

"She was white. She says: 'Mr. Wilson, I'll always think of you as a gentleman.' Them was her last words, Duke."

They were walking their horses past the house, which was dark, careful not to wake Vesta. But their care went for nothing; she was not in bed. Around the turn of the long porch they saw her standing in the moonlight, looking across the river into the lonely night. It seemed as if she stood in communion with distant places, to which she sent her longing out of a bondage that she could not flee.

"She looks lonesome," Taterleg said. "Well, I ain't a-goin' to go and pet and console her. I'm done takin' chances."

Lambert understood as never before how melancholy that life must be for her. She turned as they passed, her face clear in the bright moonlight. Taterleg swept off his hat with the grand air that took him so far with the ladies, Lambert saluting with less extravagance.

Vesta waved her hand in acknowledgment, turning again to her watching over the vast, empty land, as if she waited the coming of somebody who would quicken her life with the

cheer that it wanted so sadly that calm summer night.

Lambert felt an unusual restlessness that night — no mood over him for his bed. It seemed, in truth, that a man would be wasting valuable hours of life by locking his senses up in sleep. He put his horse away, sated with the comedy of Taterleg's adventure, and not caring to pursue it further. To get away from the discussion of it that he knew Taterleg would keep going as long as there was an ear open to hear him, he walked to the near-by hilltop to view the land under this translating spell.

This was the hilltop from which he had ridden down to interfere between Vesta and Nick Hargus. With that adventure he had opened his account of trouble in the Bad Lands, an account that was growing day by day, the final balancing of which he could not foresee.

From where he stood, the house was dark and lonely as an abandoned habitation. It seemed, indeed, that bright and full of youthful light as Vesta Philbrook was, she was only one warm candle in the gloom of this great and melancholy monument of her father's misspent hopes.

Before she could warm it into life and cheerfulness, it would encroach upon her with its chilling gloom, like an insidious cold drift of sand, smothering her beauty, burying her quick heart away from the world for which it longed, for evermore.

It would need the noise of little feet across those broad, empty, lonesome porches to wake the old house; the shouting and laughter and gleam of merry eyes that childhood brings into this world's gloom, to drive away the shadows that draped it like a mist. Perhaps Vesta stood there tonight sending her soul out in a call to someone for whom she longed, these comfortable, natural, womanly hopes in her own good heart.

He sighed, wishing her well of such hope if she had it, and forgot her in a moment as his eyes picked up a light far across the hills. Now it twinkled brightly, now it wavered and died, as if its beam was all too weak to hold to the continued effort of projecting itself so far. That must be the Kerr ranch; no other habitation lay in that direction. Perhaps in the light of that lamp somebody was sitting, bending a

dark head in pensive tenderness with a thought of him.

He stood with his pleasant fancy, his dream around him like a cloak. All the trouble that was in the world for him that hour was near the earth, like the precipitation of settling waters. Over it he gazed, superior to its ugly murk, careless of whether it might rise to befoul the clear current of his hopes, or sink and settle to obscure his dreams no more.

There was a sound of falling shale on the slope, following the disturbance of a quick foot. Vesta was coming. Unseen and unheard through the insulation of his thoughts, she had approached within ten rods of him before he saw her, the moonlight on her fair face, glorious in her uncovered hair.

CHAPTER XX

BUSINESS, AND MORE

"YOU stand out like an Indian water monument up here," she said reprovingly, as she came scrambling up, taking the hand that he hastened forward to offer and boost her over the last sharp face of crumbling shale.

"I expect Hargus could pick me off from below there anywhere, but I didn't think of that," he said.

"It wouldn't be above him," seriously, discounting the light way in which he spoke of it; "he's done things just as cowardly, and so have others you've met."

"I haven't got much opinion of the valor of men who hunt in packs, Vesta. Some of them might be skulking around, glad to take a shot at us. Don't you think we'd better go down?"

"We can sit over there and be off the skyline. It's always the safe thing to do around here."

She indicated a point where an inequality in the hill would be above their heads sitting, and there they composed themselves — the sheltering swell of hilltop at their backs.

"It's not a very complimentary reflection on a civilized community that one has to take such a precaution, but it's necessary, Duke."

"It's enough to make you want to leave it, Vesta. It's bad enough to have to dodge danger in a city, but out here, with all this lonesomeness around you, it's worse."

"Do you feel it lonesome here?" She asked it with a curious soft slowness, a speculative detachment, as if she only half thought of what she said.

"I'm never lonesome where I can see the sun rise and set. There's a lot of company in cattle, more than in any amount of people you don't know."

"I find it the same way, Duke. I never was so lonesome as when I was away from here at school."

"Everybody feels that way about home, I guess. But I thought maybe you'd like it better away among people like yourself."

"No. If it wasn't for this endless straining and watching, quarreling and contending, I wouldn't change this for any place in the world. On nights like this, when it whispers in a thousand inaudible voices, and beckons and holds one close, I feel that I never can go away. There's a call in it that is so subtle and tender, so full of sympathy, that I answer it with tears."

"I wish things could be cleared up so you could live here in peace and enjoy it, but I don't know how it's going to come out. It looks to me like I've made it worse."

"It was wrong of me to draw you into it, Duke; I should have let you go your way."

"There's no regrets on my side, Vesta. I guess it was planned for me to come this far and stop."

"They'll never rest till they've drawn you into a quarrel that will give them an excuse for killing you, Duke. They're doubly sure to do it since you got away from them that night. I shouldn't have stopped you; I should have let you go on that day."

"I had to stop somewhere, Vesta," he

laughed. "Anyway, I've found here what I started out to find. This was the end of my road."

"What you started to find, Duke?"

"A man-sized job, I guess." He laughed again, but with a colorless artificiality, sweating over the habit of solitude that leads a man into thinking aloud.

"You've found it, all right, Duke, and you're filling it. That's some satisfaction to you, I know. But it's a man-using job, a life-wasting job," she said sadly.

"I've only got myself to blame for anything that's happened to me here, Vesta. It's not the fault of the job."

"Well, if you'll stay with me till I sell the cattle, Duke, I'll think of you as the next best friend I ever had."

"I've got no intention of leaving you, Vesta."

"Thank you, Duke."

Lambert sat turning over in his mind something that he wanted to say to her, but which he could not yet shape to his tongue. She was looking in the direction of the light that he had

been watching, a gleam of which showed faintly now and then, as if between moving boughs.

"I don't like the notion of your leaving this country whipped, Vesta," he said, coming to it at last.

"I don't like to leave it whipped, Duke."

"That's the way they'll look at it if you go."

Silence again, both watching the far-distant, twinkling light.

"I laid out the job for myself of bringing these outlaws around here up to your fence with their hats in their hands, and I hate to give it up before I've made good on my word."

"Let it go, Duke; it isn't worth the fight."

"A man's word is either good for all he intends it to be, or worth no more than the lowest scoundrel's, Vesta. If I don't put up works to equal what I've promised, I'll have to sneak out of this country between two suns."

"I threw off too much on the shoulders of a willing and gallant stranger," she sighed. "Let it go, Duke; I've made up my mind to sell out and leave."

He made no immediate return to this declaration, but after a while he said:

"This will be a mighty bleak spot with the house abandoned and dark on winter nights and no stock around the barns."

"Yes, Duke."

"There's no place so lonesome as one where somebody's lived, and put his hopes and ambitions into it, and gone away and left it empty. I can hear the winter wind cuttin' around the house down yonder, mournin' like a widow woman in the night."

A sob broke from her, a sudden, sharp, struggling expression of her sorrow for the desolation that he pictured in his simple words. She bent her head into her hands and cried. Lambert was sorry for the pain that he had unwittingly stirred in her breast, but glad in a glowing tenderness to see that she had this human strain so near the surface that it could be touched by a sentiment so common, and yet so precious, as the love of home. He laid his hand on her head, stroking her soft, wavy hair.

"Never mind, Vesta," he petted, as if comforting a child. "Maybe we can fix things up here so there'll be somebody to take care of it. Never mind — don't you grieve and cry."

"It's home — the only home I ever knew. There's no place in the world that can be to me what it has been, and is."

"That's so, that's so. I remember, I know. The wind don't blow as soft, the sun don't shine as bright, anywhere else as it does at home. It's been a good while since I had one, and it wasn't much to see, but I've got the recollection of it by me always — I can see every log in the walls."

He felt her shiver with the sobs she struggled to repress as his hand rested on her hair. His heart went out to her in a surge of tenderness when he thought of all she had staked in that land — her youth and the promise of life — of all she had seen planned in hope, built in expectation, and all that lay buried now on the bleak mesa marked by two white stones.

And he caressed her with gentle hand, looking away the while at the spark of light that came and went, came and went, as if through blowing leaves. So it flashed and fell, flashed and fell, like a slow, slow pulse, and died out, as a spark in tinder dies, leaving the far night blank.

Vesta sat up, pushed her hair back from her

forehead, her white hand lingering there. He touched it, pressed it comfortingly.

"But I'll have to go," she said, calm in voice, "to end this trouble and strife."

"I've been wondering, since I'm kind of pledged to clean things up here, whether you'd consider a business proposal from me in regard to taking charge of the ranch for you while you're gone, Vesta."

She looked up with a quick start of eagerness.

"You mean I oughtn't sell the cattle, Duke?"

"Yes, I think you ought to clean them out. The bulk of them are in as high condition as they'll ever be, and the market's better right now that it's been in years."

"Well, what sort of a proposal were you going to make, Duke?"

"Sheep."

"Father used to consider turning around to sheep. The country would come to it, he said."

"Coming to it more and more every day. The sheep business is the big future thing in here. Inside of five years everybody will be in

the sheep business, and that will mean the end of these rustler camps that go under the name of cattle ranches."

"I'm willing to consider sheep, Duke. Go ahead with the plan."

"There's twice the money in them, and not half the expense. One man can take care of two or three thousand, and you can get sheep-herders any day. There can't be any possible objection to them inside your own fence, and you've got range for ten or fifteen thousand. I'd suggest about a thousand to begin with, though."

"I'd do it in a minute, Duke — I'll do it whenever you say the word. Then I could leave Ananias and Myrtle here, and I could come back in the summer for a little while, maybe."

She spoke with such eagerness, such appeal of loneliness, that he knew it would break her heart ever to go at all. So there on the hilltop they planned and agreed on the change from cattle to sheep, Lambert to have half the increase, according to the custom, with herder's wages for two years. She would have been more generous in the matter of pay, but that

was the basis upon which he had made his plans, and he would admit no change.

Vesta was as enthusiastic over it as a child, all eagerness to begin, seeing in the change a promise of the peace for which she had so ardently longed. She appeared to have come suddenly from under a cloud of oppression and to sparkle in the sun of this new hope. It was only when they came to parting at the porch that the ghost of her old trouble came to take its place at her side again.

"Has she cut the fence lately over there, Duke?" she asked.

"Not since I caught her at it. I don't think she'll do it again."

"Did she promise you she wouldn't cut it, Duke?"

She did not look at him as she spoke, but stood with her face averted, as if she would avoid prying into his secret too directly. Her voice was low, a note of weary sadness in it that seemed a confession of the uselessness of turning her back upon the strife that she would forget.

"No, she didn't promise."

"If she doesn't cut the fence she'll plan to hurt me in some other way. It isn't in her to be honest; she couldn't be honest if she tried."

"I don't like to condemn anybody without a trial, Vesta. Maybe she's changed."

"You can't change a rattlesnake. You seem to forget that she's a Kerr."

"Even at that, she might be different from the rest."

"She never has been. You've had a taste of the Kerr methods, but you're not satisfied yet that they're absolutely base and dishonorable in every thought and deed. You'll find it out to your cost, Duke, if you let that girl lead you. She's a will-o'-the-wisp sent to lure you from the trail."

Lambert laughed a bit foolishly, as a man does when the intuition of a woman uncovers the thing that he prided himself was so skilfully concealed that mortal eyes could not find it. Vesta was reading through him like a piece of greased parchment before a lamp.

"I guess it will all come out right," he said weakly.

"You'll meet Kerr one of these days with

your old score between you, and he'll kill you or you'll kill him. She knows it as well as I do. Do you suppose she can be sincere with you and keep this thing covered up in her heart? You seem to have forgotten what she remembers and plots on every minute of her life."

"I don't think she knows anything about what happened to me that night, Vesta."

"She knows all about it," said Vesta coldly.

"I don't know her very well, of course; I've only passed a few words with her," he excused.

"And a few notes hung on the fence!" she said, not able to hide her scorn. "She's gone away laughing at you every time."

"I thought maybe peace and quiet could be established through her if she could be made to see things in a civilized way."

Vesta made no rejoinder at once. She put her foot on the step as if to leave him, withdrew it, faced him gravely.

"It's nothing to me, Duke, only I don't want to see her lead you into another fire. Keep your eyes open and your hand close to your gun when you're visiting with her."

She left him with that advice, given so

gravely and honestly that it amounted to more than a warning. He felt that there was something more for him to say to make his position clear, but could not marshal his words. Vesta entered the house without looking back to where he stood, hat in hand, the moonlight in his fair hair.

CHAPTER XXI

A TEST OF LOYALTY

LAMBERT rode to his rendezvous with Grace Kerr on the appointed day, believing that she would keep it, although her promise had been inconclusive. She had only "expected" she would be there, but he more than expected she would come.

He was in a pleasant mood that morning, sentimentally softened to such extent that he believed he might even call accounts off with Sim Hargus and the rest of them if Grace could arrange a peace. Vesta was a little rough on her, he believed. Grace was showing a spirit that seemed to prove she wanted only gentle guiding to abandon the practices of violence to which she had been bred.

Certainly, compared to Vesta, she seemed of coarser ware, even though she was as handsome as heart could desire. This he admitted without prejudice, not being yet wholly blind. But

there was no bond of romance between Vesta and him. There was no place for romance between a man and his boss. Romance bound him to Grace Kerr; sentiment enchained him. It was a sweet enslavement, and one to be prolonged in his desire.

Grace was not in sight when he reached their meeting-place. He let down the wire and rode to meet her, troubled as before by that feeling of disloyalty to the Philbrook interests which caused him to stop more than once and debate whether he should turn back and wait inside the fence.

The desire to hasten the meeting with Grace was stronger than this question of his loyalty. He went on, over the hill from which she used to spy on his passing, into the valley where he had interfered between the two girls on the day that he found Grace hidden away in this unexpected place. There he met her coming down the farther slope.

Grace was quite a different figure that day from any she had presented before, wearing a perky little highland bonnet with an eagle feather in it, and a skirt and blouse of the same

plaid. His eyes announced his approval as they met, leaning to shake hands from the saddle.

Immediately he brought himself to task for his late admission that she was inferior in the eyes to Vesta. That misappraisement was due to the disadvantage under which he had seen Grace heretofore. This morning she was as dainty as a fresh-blown pink, and as delicately sweet. He swung from the saddle and stood off admiring her with so much speaking from his eyes that she grew rosy in their fire.

"Will you get down, Grace? I've never had a chance to see how tall you are — I couldn't tell that day on the train."

The eagle feather came even with his ear when she stood beside him, slender and strong, health in her eyes, her womanhood ripening in her lips. Not as tall as Vesta, not as full of figure, he began in mental measurement, burning with self-reproof when he caught himself at it. Why should he always be drawing comparisons between her and Vesta, to her disadvantage in all things? It was unwarranted, it was absurd!

They sat on the hillside, their horses nipping each other in introductory preliminaries, then settling down to immediate friendship. They were far beyond sight of the fence. Lambert hoped, with an uneasy return of that feeling of disloyalty and guilt, that Vesta would not come riding up that way and find the open strands of wire.

This thought passed away and troubled him no more as they sat talking of the strange way of their "meeting on the run," as she said.

"There isn't a horse in a thousand that could have caught up with me that day."

"Not one in thousands," he amended, with due gratitude to Whetstone.

"I expected you'd be riding him today, Duke."

"He backed into a fire," said he uneasily, "and burned off most of his tail. He's no sight for a lady in his present shape."

She laughed, looking at him shrewdly, as if she believed it to be a joke to cover something that he didn't want her to know.

"But you promised to give him to me, Duke, when he rested up a little."

"I will," he declared earnestly, getting hold of her hand where it lay in the grass between them. "I'll give you anything I've got, Grace, from the breath in my body to the blood in my heart!"

She bent her head, her face rosy with her mounting blood.

"Would you, Duke?" said she, so softly that it was not much more than the flutter of the wings of words.

He leaned a little nearer, his heart climbing, as if it meant to smother him and cut him short in that crowning moment of his dream.

"I'd have gone to the end of the world to find you, Grace," he said, his voice shaking as if he had a chill, his hands cold, his face hot, a tingling in his body, a sound in his ears like bells. "I want to tell you how ——"

"Wait, Duke — I want to hear it all — but wait a minute. There's something I want to ask you to do for me. Will you do me a favor, Duke, a simple favor, but one that means the world and all to me?"

"Try me," said he, with boundless confidence.

"It's more than giving me your horse, Duke; a whole lot more than that, but it'll not hurt you — you can do it, if you will."

"I know you wouldn't ask me to do anything that would reflect on my honesty or honor," he said, beginning to do a little thinking as his nervous chill passed.

"A man doesn't — when a man *cares* —" She stopped, looking away, a little constriction in her throat.

"What is it, Grace?" pressing her hand encouragingly, master of the situation now, as he believed.

"Duke" — she turned to him suddenly, her eyes wide and luminous, her heart going so he could see the tremor of its vibrations in the lace at her throat — "I want you to lend me tomorrow morning, for one day, just one day, Duke — five hundred head of Vesta Philbrook's cattle."

"That's a funny thing to ask, Grace," said he uneasily.

"I want you to meet me over there where I cut the fence before sunup in the morning, and have everybody out of the way, so we can cut

them out and drive them over here. You can manage it, if you want to, Duke. You will, if you — if you *care.*"

"If they were my cattle, Grace, I wouldn't hesitate a second."

"You'll do it, anyhow, won't you, Duke, for me?"

"What in the world do you want them for, just for one day?"

"I can't explain that to you now, Duke, but I pledge you my honor, I pledge you everything, that they'll be returned to you before night, not a head missing, nothing wrong."

"Does your father know — does he ——"

"It's for myself that I'm asking this of you, Duke; nobody else. It means — it means — *everything* to me."

"If they were my cattle, Grace, if they were my cattle," said he aimlessly, amazed by the request, groping for the answer that lay behind it. What could a girl want to borrow five hundred head of cattle for? What in the world would she get out of holding them in her possession one day and then turning them back into the pasture? There was something back of it;

she was the innocent emissary of a crafty hand that had a trick to play.

"We could run them over here, just you and I, and nobody would know anything about it," she tempted, the color back in her cheeks, her eyes bright as in the pleasure of a request already granted.

"I don't like to refuse you even that, Grace."

"You'll do it, you'll do it, Duke?" Her hand was on his arm in beguiling caress, her eyes were pleading into his.

"I'm afraid not, Grace."

Perhaps she felt a shading of coldness in his denial, for distrust and suspicion were rising in his cautious mind. It did not seem to him a thing that could be asked with any honest purpose, but for what dishonest one he had no conjecture to fit.

"Are you going to turn me down on the first request I ever made of you, Duke?" She watched him keenly as she spoke, making her eyes small, an inflection of sorrowful injury in her tone.

"If there's anything of my own you want, if there's anything you can name for me to do,

personally, all you've got to do is hint at it once."

"It's easy to say that when there's nothing else I want!" she said, snapping it at him as sharp as the crack of a little whip.

"If there *was* anything——"

"There'll never be anything!"

She got up, flashing him an indignant look. He stood beside her, despising the poverty of his condition which would not allow him to deliver over to her, out of hand, the small matter of five hundred beeves.

She went to her horse, mightily put out and impatient with him, as he could see, threw the reins over her pommel, as if she intended to leave him at once. She delayed mounting, suddenly putting out her hands in supplication, tears springing in her eyes.

"Oh, Duke! If you knew how much it means to me," she said.

"Why don't you tell me, Grace?"

"Even if you stayed back there on the hills somewhere and watched them you wouldn't do it, Duke?" she appealed, evading his request.

He shook his head slowly, while the thoughts

within it ran like wildfire, seeking the thing that she covered.

"It can't be done."

"I give you my word, Duke, that if you'll do it nobody will ever lift a hand against this ranch again."

"It's almost worth it," said he.

She quickened at this, enlarging her guarantee.

"We'll drop all of the old feud and let Vesta alone. I give you my word for all of them, and I'll see that they carry it out. You can do Vesta as big a favor as you'll be doing me, Duke."

"It couldn't be done without her consent, Grace. If you want to go to her with this same proposal, putting it plainly like you have to me, I think she'll let you have the cattle, if you can show her any good reason for it."

"Just as if I'd be fool enough to ask her!"

"That's the only way."

"Duke," said she coaxingly, "wouldn't it be worth something to you, personally, to have your troubles settled without a fight? I'll promise you nobody will ever lift a hand against you again if you'll do this for me."

He started, looked at her sternly, approaching her a step.

"What do you know about anything that's happened to me?" he demanded.

"I don't know anything about what's happened, but I know what's due to happen if it isn't headed off."

Lambert did some hard thinking for a little while, so hard that it wrenched him to the marrow. If he had had suspicion of her entire innocence in the solicitation of this unusual favor before, it had sprung in a moment into distrust. Such a quick reversion cannot take place in the sentiment without a shock. It seemed to Lambert that something valuable had been snatched away from him, and that he stood in bewilderment, unable to reach out and retrieve his loss.

"Then there's no use in discussing it any more," he said, groping back, trying to answer her.

"You'd do it for her!"

"Not for her any quicker than for you."

"I know it looks crooked to you, Duke — I don't blame you for your suspicions," she said with a frankness that seemed more like herself,

he thought. She even seemed to be coming back to him in that approach. It made him glad.

"Tell me all about it, Grace," he urged.

She came close to him, put her arm about his neck, drew his head down as if to whisper her confidence in his ear. Her breath was on his cheek, his heart was afire in one foolish leap. She put up her lips as if to kiss him, and he, reeling in the ecstasy of his proximity to her radiant body, bent nearer to take what she seemed to offer.

She drew back, her hand interposed before his eager lips, shaking her head, denying him prettily.

"In the morning, I'll tell you all in the morning when I meet you to drive the cattle over," she said. "Don't say a word — I'll not take no for my answer." She turned quickly to her horse and swung lightly into the saddle. From this perch she leaned toward him, her hand on his shoulder, her lips drawing him in their fiery lure again. "In the morning — in the morning — you can kiss me, Duke!"

With that word, that promise, she turned and galloped away.

It was late afternoon, and Lambert had faced back toward the ranchhouse, troubled by all that he could not understand in that morning's meeting, thrilled and fired by all that was sweet to remember, when he met a man who came riding in the haste of one who had business ahead of him that could not wait. He was riding one of Vesta Philbrook's horses, a circumstance that sharpened Lambert's interest in him at once.

As they closed the distance between them, Lambert keeping his hand in the easy neighborhood of his gun, the man raised his hand, palm forward, in the Indian sign of peace. Lambert saw that he wore a shoulder holster which supported two heavy revolvers. He was a solemn-looking man with a narrow face, a mustache that crowded Taterleg's for the championship, a buckskin vest with pearl buttons. His coat was tied on the saddle at his back.

"I didn't steal this horse," he explained with a sorrowful grin as he drew up within arm's length of Lambert, "I requisitioned it. I'm the sheriff."

"Yes, sir?" said Lambert, not quite taking

him for granted, no intention of letting him pass on with that explanation.

"Miss Philbrook said I'd run across you up this way."

The officer produced his badge, his commission, his card, his letterhead, his credentials of undoubted strength. On the proof thus supplied, Lambert shook hands with him.

"I guess everybody else in the county knows me — this is my second term, and I never was taken for a horse thief before," the sheriff said, solemn as a crow, as he put his papers away.

"I'm a stranger in this country, I don't know anybody, nobody knows me, so you'll not take it as a slight that I didn't recognize you, Mr. Sheriff."

"No harm done, Duke, no harm done. Well, I guess you're a little wider known than you make out. I didn't bring a man along with me because I knew you were up here at Philbrook's. Hold up your hand and be sworn."

"What's the occasion?" Lambert inquired, making no move to comply with the order.

"I've got a warrant for this man Kerr over south of here, and I want you to go with me.

Kerr's a bad egg, in a nest of bad eggs. There's likely to be too much trouble for one man to handle alone. You do solemnly swear to support the constitution of the ——"

"Wait a minute, Mr. Sheriff," Lambert demurred; "I don't know that I want to mix up in ——"

"It's not for you to say what you want to do — that's my business," the sheriff said sharply. He forthwith deputized Lambert, and gave him a duplicate of the warrant. "You don't need it, but it'll clear your mind of all doubt of your power," he explained. "Can we get through this fence?"

"Up here six or seven miles, about opposite Kerr's place. But I'd like to go on to the house and change horses; I've rode this one over forty miles today already."

The sheriff agreed. "Where's that outlaw you won from Jim Wilder?" he inquired, turning his eyes on Lambert in friendly appreciation.

"I'll ride him," Lambert returned briefly. "What's Kerr been up to?"

"Mortgaged a bunch of cattle he's got over

there to three different banks. He was down a couple of days ago tryin' to put through another loan. The investigation that banker started laid him bare. He promised Kerr to come up tomorrow and look over his security, and passed the word on to the county attorney. Kerr said he'd just bought five hundred head of stock. He wanted to raise the loan on them."

"Five hundred," said Lambert, mechanically repeating the sheriff's words, doing some calculating of his own.

"He ain't got any that ain't blanketed with mortgage paper so thick already they'd go through a blizzard and never know it. His scheme was to raise five or six thousand dollars more on that outfit and skip the country."

And Grace Kerr had relied on his infatuation for her to work on him for the loan of the necessary cattle. Lambert could not believe that it was all her scheme, but it seemed incredible that a man as shrewdly dishonest as Kerr would entertain a plan that promised so little outlook of success. They must have believed over at Kerr's that they had him pretty well on the line.

But Kerr had figured too surely on having

his neighbor's cattle to show the banker to stake all on the chance of Grace being able to wheedle him into the scheme. If he couldn't get them by seduction, he meant to take them in a raid. Grace never intended to come to meet him in the morning alone.

One crime more would amount to little in addition to what Kerr had done already, and it would be a trick on which he would pride himself and laugh over all the rest of his life. It seemed certain now that Grace's friendliness all along had been laid on a false pretense, with the one intention of beguiling him to his disgrace, his destruction, if disgrace could not be accomplished without it.

As he rode Whetstone — now quite recovered from his scorching, save for the hair of his once fine tail — beside the sheriff, Lambert had some uneasy cogitations on his sentimental blindness of the past; on the good, honest advice that Vesta Philbrook had given him. Blood was blood, after all. If the source of it was base, it was too much to hope that a little removal, a little dilution, would ennoble it. She had lived there all her life the associate of thieves and

rascals; her way of looking on men and property must naturally be that of the depredator, the pillager, and thief.

"And yet," thought he, thumb in the pocket of his hairy vest where the little handkerchief lay, "and yet——"

CHAPTER XXII

THE WILL-O'-THE-WISP

THE Kerr ranch buildings were more than a mile away from the point where Lambert and the sheriff halted to look down on them. The ranchhouse was a structure of logs from which the bark had been stripped, and which had weathered white as bones. It was long and low, suggesting spaciousness and comfort, and enclosed about by a white picket fence.

A winding trace of trees and brushwood marked the course of the stream that ran behind it. On the brink of this little water, where it flashed free of the tangled willows, there was a corral and stables, but no sign of either animal or human life about the place.

"He may be out with the cattle," Lambert suggested.

"We'll wait for him to come back, if he is. He's sure to be home between now and tomorrow."

So that was her home, that was the roof that had sheltered her while she grew in her loveliness. The soft call of his romance came whispering to him again. Surely there was no attainder of blood to rise up against her and make her unclean; he would have sworn that moment, if put to the test, that she was innocent of any knowing attempt to involve him to his disgrace. The gate of the world stood open to them to go away from that harsh land and forget all that had gone before, as the gate of his heart was open for all the love that it contained to rush out and embrace her, and purge her of the unfortunate accident of her birth.

After this, poor child, she would need a friend, as never before, with only her stepmother, as she had told him, in the world to befriend her. A man's hand, a man's heart ——

"I'll take the front door," said the sheriff. "You watch the back."

Lambert came out of his softening dream, down to the hard facts in the case before him with a jolt. They were within half a mile of the house, approaching it from the front. He saw that it was built in the shape of an L, the base

of the letter to the left of them, shutting off a view of the angle.

"He may see us in time to duck," the sheriff said, "and you can bank on it he's got a horse saddled around there at the back door. If he comes your way, don't fool with him; let him have it where he lives."

They had not closed up half the distance between them and the house when two horsemen rode suddenly round the corner of the L and through the wide gate in the picket fence. Outside the fence they separated with the suddenness of a preconcerted plan, darting away in opposite directions. Each wore a white hat, and from that distance they appeared as much alike in size and bearing as a man and his reflection.

The sheriff swore a surprised oath at sight of them, and their cunning plan to confuse and divide the pursuing force.

"Which one of 'em's Kerr?" he shouted as he leaned in his saddle, urging his horse on for all that it could do.

"I don't know," Lambert returned.

"I'll chance this one," said the sheriff, pointing. "Take the other feller."

Lambert knew that one of them was Grace Kerr. That he could not tell which, he upbraided himself, not willing that she should be subjected to the indignity of pursuit. It was a clever trick, but the preparation for it and the readiness with which it was put into play seemed to reflect a doubt of her entire innocence in her father's dishonest transactions. Still, it was no more than natural that she should bend every faculty to the assistance of her father in escaping the penalty of his crimes. He would do it himself under like conditions; the unnatural would be the other course.

These things he thought as he rode into the setting sun in pursuit of the fugitive designated by the sheriff. Whetstone was fresh and eager after his long rest, in spite of the twelve or fifteen miles which he had covered already between the two ranches. Lambert held him in, doubtful whether he would be able to overtake the fleeing rider before dark with the advantage of distance and a fresh horse that he or she had.

If Kerr rode ahead of him, then he must be overtaken before night gave him sanctuary; if Grace, it was only necessary to come close

enough to her to make sure, then let her go her way untroubled. He held the distance pretty well between them till sundown, when he felt the time had come to close in and settle the doubt. Whetstone was still mainly in reserve, tireless, deep-winded creature that he was.

Lambert leaned over his neck, caressed him, spoke into the ear that tipped watchfully back. They were in fairly smooth country, stretches of thin grasslands and broken barrens, but beyond them, a few miles, the hills rose, treeless and dun, offering refuge for the one who fled. Pursuit there would be difficult by day, impossible by night.

Whetstone quickened at his master's encouragement, pushing the race hard for the one who led, cutting down the distance so rapidly that it seemed the other must be purposely delaying. Half an hour more of daylight and it would be over.

The rider in the lead had driven his or her horse too hard in the beginning, leaving no recovery of wind. Lambert remarked its weariness as it took the next hill, laboring on in short, stiff jumps. At the top the rider held in, as if

to let the animal blow. It stood with nose close to the ground, weariness in every line.

The sky was bright beyond horse and rider, cut sharply by the line of the hill. Against it the picture stood, black as a shadow, but with an unmistakable pose in the rider that made Lambert's heart jump and grow glad.

It was Grace; chance had been kind to him again, leading him in the way his heart would have gone if it had been given the choice. She looked back, turning with a hand on the cantle of her saddle. He waved his hand, to assure her, but she did not seem to read the friendly signal, for she rode on again, disappearing over the hill before he reached the crest.

He plunged down after her, not sparing his horse where he should have spared him, urging him on when they struck the level again. There was no thought in him of Whetstone now — only of Grace.

He must overtake her in the quickest possible time, and convince her of his friendly sympathy; he must console and comfort her in this hour of her need. Brave little thing, to draw him off that way, to keep on running into the

very edge of night, that wild country ahead of her, for fear he would come close enough to recognize her and turn back to help the sheriff on the true trail. That's what was in her mind; she thought he hadn't recognized her, and was still fleeing to draw him as far away as possible by dark. When he could come within shouting distance of her, he could make his intention plain. To that end he pushed on. Her horse had shown a fresh impulse of speed, carrying her a little farther ahead. They were drawing close to the hills now, with a growth of harsh and thorny brushwood in the low places along the runlets of dry streams.

Poor little bird, fleeing from him, luring him on like a trembling quail that flutters before one's feet in the wheat to draw him away from her nest. She didn't know the compassion of his heart, the tenderness in which it strained to her over the intervening space. He forgot all, he forgave all, in the soft pleading of romance which came back to him like a well-loved melody.

He fretted that dusk was falling so fast. In the little strips of valley, growing narrower as

he proceeded between the abrupt hills, it was so nearly dark already that she appeared only dimly ahead of him, urging her horse on with unsparing hand. It seemed that she must have some objective ahead of her, some refuge which she strained to make, some help that she hoped to summon.

He wondered if it might be the cow-camp, and felt a cold indraft on the hot tenderness of his heart for a moment. But, no; it could not be the cow-camp. There was no sign that grazing herds had been there lately. She was running because she was afraid to have him overtake her in the dusk, running to prolong the race until she could elude him in the dark, afraid of him, who loved her so!

They were entering the desolation of the hills. On the sides of the thin strip of valley, down which he pursued her, there were great, dark rocks, as big as cottages along a village street. He shouted, calling her name, fearful that he should lose her in this broken country in the fast-deepening night. Although she was not more than two hundred yards ahead of him now, she did not seem to hear. In a moment she

turned the base of a great rock, and there he lost her.

The valley split a few rods beyond that point, broadening a little, still set with its fantastic black monuments of splintered rock. It was impossible to see among them in either direction as far as Grace had been in the lead when she passed out of his sight. He pulled up and shouted again, an appeal of tender concern in her name. There was no reply, no sound of her fleeing horse.

He leaned to look at the ground for tracks. No trace of her passing on the hard earth with its mangy growth of grass. On a little way, stopping to call her once more. His voice went echoing in that quiet place, but there was no reply.

He turned back, thinking she must have gone down the other branch of the valley. Whetstone came to a sudden stop, lifted his head with a jerk, his ears set forward, snorting an alarm. Quick on his action there came a shot, close at hand. Whetstone started with a quivering bound, stumbled to his knees, struggled to rise, then floundered with piteous groans.

CHAPTER XXIII

UNMASKED

LAMBERT was out of the saddle at the sound of the shot. He sprang to the shelter of the nearest rock, gun in hand, thinking with a sweep of bitterness that Grace Kerr had led him into a trap. Whetstone was lying still, his chin on the ground, one foreleg bent and gathered under him, not in the posture of a dead horse, although Lambert knew that he was dead. It was as if the brave beast struggled even after life to picture the quality of his unconquerable will, and would not lie in death as other horses lay, cold and inexpressive of anything but death, with stiff limbs straight.

Lambert was incautious of his own safety in his great concern for his horse. He stepped clear of his shelter to look at him, hoping against his conviction that he would rise. Somebody laughed behind the rock on his right, a laugh that plucked his heart up and cast it

down, as a drunken hand shatters a goblet upon the floor.

"I guess you'll never race me on *that* horse again, fence-rider!"

There was the sound of movement behind the rock; in a moment Grace Kerr rode out from her concealment, not more than four rods beyond the place where his horse lay. She rode out boldly and indifferently before his eyes, turned and looked back at him, her face white as an evening primrose in the dusk, as if to tell him that she knew she was safe, even within the distance of his arm, much as she despised his calling and his kind.

Lambert put his gun back in its sheath, and she rode on, disappearing again from his sight around the rock where the blasted valley of stones branched upon its arid way. He took the saddle from his dead horse and hid it behind a rock, not caring much whether he ever found it again, his heart so heavy that it seemed to bow him to the ground.

So at last he knew her for what Vesta Philbrook had told him she was — bad to the core of her heart. Kindness could not regenerate her,

love could not purge away the vicious strain of blood. She might have scorned him, and he would have bent his head and loved her more; struck him, and he would have chided her with a look of love. But when she sent her bullet into poor old Whetstone's brain, she placed herself beyond any absolution that even his soft heart could yield.

He bent over Whetstone, caressing his head, speaking to him in his old terms of endearment, thinking of the many fruitless races he had run, believing that his own race in the Bad Lands had come to an end.

If he had but turned back from the foot of the hill where he recognized her, as duty demanded of him that he turn, and not pressed on with his simple intention of friendliness which she was too shallow to appreciate or understand, this heavy loss would have been spared him. For this dead animal was more to him than comrade and friend; more than any man who has not shared the good and evil times with his horse in the silent places can comprehend.

He could not fight a woman; there was no measure of revenge that he could take against

her, but he prayed that she might suffer for this deed of treachery to him with a pang intensified a thousand times greater than his that hour. Will-o'-the-wisp she had been to him, indeed, leading him a fool's race since she first came twinkling into his life.

Bitter were his reflections, somber was his heart, as he turned to walk the thirty miles or more that lay between him and the ranch, leaving old Whetstone to the wolves.

Lambert was loading cattle nearly a week later when the sheriff returned Vesta's horse, with apologies for its footsore and beaten state. He had followed Kerr far beyond his jurisdiction, pushing him a hard race through the hills, but the wily cattleman had evaded him in the end.

The sheriff advised Lambert to put in a bill against the county for the loss of his horse, a proposal which Lambert considered with grave face and in silence.

"No," he said at last, "I'll not put in a bill. I'll collect in my own way from the one that owes me the debt."

CHAPTER XXIV

USE FOR AN OLD PAPER

LAMBERT was a busy man for several weeks after his last race with the will-o'-the-wisp, traveling between Glendora and Chicago, disposing of the Philbrook herd. On this day he was jolting along with the last of the cattle that were of marketable condition and age, twenty cars of them, glad that the wind-up of it was in sight.

Taterleg had not come this time on account of the Iowa boy having quit his job. There remained several hundred calves and thin cows in the Philbrook pasture, too much of a temptation to old Nick Hargus and his precious brother Sim to be left unguarded.

Sitting there on top of a car, his prod-pole between his knees, in his high-heeled boots and old dusty hat, the Duke was a typical figure of the old-time cow-puncher such as one never meets in these times around the stockyards of

the Middle West. There are still cow-punchers, but they are mainly mail-order ones who would shy from a gun such as pulled down on Lambert's belt that day.

He sat there with the wind slamming the brim of his old hat up against the side of his head, a sober, serious man, such as one would choose for a business like this intrusted to him by Vesta Philbrook and never make a mistake. Already he had sold more than eighty thousand dollars' worth of cattle for her, and carried home to her the drafts. This time he was to take back the money, so they would have the cash to buy out Walleye, the sheepman, who was making a failure of the business and was anxious to quit.

The Duke wondered, with a lonesome sort of pleasure, how things were going on the ranch that afternoon, and whether Taterleg was riding the south fence now and then, as he had suggested, or sticking with the cattle. That was a pleasant country which he was traveling through, green fields and rich pastures as far as the eye could reach, a land such as he had spent the greater part of his life in, such as some peo-

ple who are provincial and untraveled call "God's country," and are fully satisfied with in their way.

But there seemed something lacking out of it to Lambert as he looked across the verdant flatness with pensive eyes, that great, gray something that took hold of a man and drew him into its larger life, smoothed the wrinkles out of him, and stood him upright on his feet with the breath deeper in him than it ever had gone before. He felt that he never would be content to remain amongst the visible plentitude of that fat, complacent, finished land again.

Give him some place that called for a fight, a place where the wind blew with a different flavor than these domestic scents of hay and fresh-turned furrows in the wheatlands by the road. In his vision he pictured the place that he liked best — a rough, untrammeled country leading back to the purple hills, a long line of fence diminishing in its distance to a thread. He sighed, thinking of it. Dog-gone his melts, he was lonesome — lonesome for a fence!

He rolled a cigarette and felt about himself abstractedly for a match, in this pocket, where

Grace Kerr's little handkerchief still lay, with no explanation or defense for its presence contrived or attempted; in that pocket, where his thumb encountered a folded paper.

Still abstracted, his head turned to save his cigarette from the wind, he drew out this paper, wondering curiously when he had put it there and forgotten it. It was the warrant for the arrest of Berry Kerr. He remembered now having folded the paper and put it there the day the sheriff gave it to him, never having read a word of it from that day to this. Now he repaired that omission. It gave him quite a feeling of importance to have a paper about him with that severe legal phraseology in it. He folded it and put it back in his pocket, wondering what had become of Berry Kerr, and from him transferring his thoughts to Grace.

She was still there on the ranch, he knew, although Kerr's creditors had cleaned out the cattle, and doubtless were at law among themselves over the proceeds by now. How she would live, what she would do, he wondered. Perhaps Kerr had left some of the money he had made out of his multimortgage transactions, or perhaps he

would send for Grace and his wife when he had struck a gait in some other place.

It didn't matter one way or another. His interest in her was finished, his last gentle thought of her was dead. Only he hoped that she might live to be as hungry for a friendly word as his heart had been hungry of longing after her in its day; that she might moan in contrition and burn in shame for the cruelty in which she broke the vessel of his friendship and threw the fragments in his face. Poor old Whetstone! his bones all scattered by the wolves by now over in that lonely gorge.

Vesta Philbrook would not have been capable of a vengeance so mean. Strange how she had grown so gentle and so good under the constant persecution of this thieving gang! Her conscience was as clear as a windowpane; a man could look through her soul and see the world undisturbed by a flaw beyond it. A good girl; she sure was a good girl. And as pretty a figure on a horse as man's eye ever followed.

She had said once that she felt it lonesome out there by the fence. Not half as lonesome, he'd gamble, as he was that minute to be back

there riding her miles and miles of wire. Not lonesome on account of Vesta; sure not. Just lonesome for that dang old fence.

Simple he was, sitting there on top of that hammering old cattle car that sunny afternoon, the dust of the road in his three-day-old beard, his barked willow prod-pole between his knees; simple as a ballad that children sing, simple as a homely tune.

Well, of course he had kept Grace Kerr's little handkerchief, for reasons that he could not quite define. Maybe because it seemed to represent her as he would have had her; maybe because it was the poor little trophy of his first tenderness, his first yearning for a woman's love. But he had kept it with the dim intention of giving it back to her, opportunity presenting.

"Yes, I'll give it back to her," he nodded; "when the time comes I'll hand it to her. She can wipe her eyes on it when she opens them and repents."

Then he fell to thinking of business, and what was best for Vesta's interests, and of how he probably would take up Pat Sullivan's offer for the calves, thus cleaning up her troubles and

making an end of her expenses. Pat Sullivan, the rancher for whom Ben Jedlick was cook; he was the man. The Duke smiled through his grime and dust when he remembered Jedlick lying back in the barber's chair.

And old Taterleg, as good as gold and honest as a horse, was itching to be hitting the breeze for Wyoming. Selling the calves would give him the excuse that he had been casting about after for a month. He was writing letters to Nettie; she had sent her picture. A large-breasted, calf-faced girl with a crooked mouth. Taterleg might wait a year, or even four years more, with perfect safety. Nettie would not move very fast on the market, even in Wyoming, where ladies were said to be scarce.

And so, pounding along, mile after mile through the vast green land where the bread of a nation grew, arriving at midnight among squeals and moans, trembling bleat of sheep, pitiful, hungry crying of calves, high, lonesome tenor notes of bewildered steers. That was the end of the journey for him, the beginning of the great adventure for the creatures under his care.

By eleven o'clock next morning, Lambert had a check for the cattle in his pocket, and bay rum on his face where the dust, the cinders and the beard had been but a little while before. He bought a little hand satchel in a second-hand store to carry the money home in, cashed his check and took a turn looking around, his big gun on his leg, his high-heeled boots making him toddle along in a rather ridiculous gait for an able-bodied cow-puncher from the Bad Lands.

There was a train for home at six, that same flier he once had raced. There would be time enough for a man to look into the progress of the fine arts as represented in the pawn-shop windows of the stockyards neighborhood, before striking a line for the Union Station to nail down a seat in the flier. It was while engaged in this elevating pursuit that Lambert glimpsed for an instant in the passing stream of people a figure that made him start with the prickling alertness of recognition.

He had caught but a flash of the hurrying figure but, with that eye for singling a certain object from a moving mass that experience with cattle sharpens, he recognized the carriage of

the head, the set of the shoulders. He hurried after, overtaking the man as he was entering a hotel.

"Mr. Kerr, I've got a warrant for you," he said, detaining the fugitive with a hand laid on his shoulder.

Kerr was taken so unexpectedly that he had no chance to sling a gun, even if he carried one. He was completely changed in appearance, even to the sacrifice of his prized beard, so long his aristocratic distinction in the Bad Lands. He was dressed in the city fashion, with a little straw hat in place of the eighteen-inch sombrero that he had worn for years. Confident of this disguise, he affected astonished indignation.

"I guess you've made a mistake in your man," said he.

Lambert told him with polite firmness that there was no mistake.

"I'd know your voice in the dark — I've got reason to remember it," he said.

He got the warrant out with one hand, keeping the other comfortably near his gun, the little hand bag with its riches between his feet. Kerr was so vehemently indignant that atten-

tion was drawn to them, which probably was the fugitive cattleman's design, seeing in numbers a chance to make a dash.

Lambert had not forgotten the experience of his years at the Kansas City Stockyards, where he had seen confidence men and card sharpers play the same scheme on policemen, clamoring their innocence until a crowd had been attracted in which the officer would not dare risk a shot. He kept Kerr within reaching distance, flashed the warrant before his eyes, passed it up and down in front of his nose, and put it away again.

"There's no mistake, not by a thousand miles. You'll come along back to Glendora with me."

A policeman appeared by this time, and Kerr appealed to him, protesting mistaken identity. The officer was a heavy-headed man of the slaughter-house school, and Lambert thought for a while that Kerr's argument was going to prevail with him. To forestall the policeman's decision, which he could see forming behind his clouded countenance, Lambert said:

"There's a reward of nine hundred dollars standing for this man. If you've got any doubt

of who he is, or my right to arrest him, take us both to headquarters."

That seemed to be a worthy suggestion to the officer. He acted on it without more drain on his intellectual reserve. There, after a little course of sprouts by the chief of detectives, Kerr admitted his identity, but refused to leave the state without requisition They locked him up, and Lambert telegraphed the sheriff for the necessary papers.

Going home was off for perhaps several days. Lambert gave his little satchel to the police to lock in the safe. The sheriff's reply came back like a pitched ball. Hold Kerr, he requested the police; requisition would be made for him. He instructed Lambert to wait till the papers came, and bring the fugitive home.

Kerr got in telegraphic touch with a lawyer in the home county. Morning showed a considerable change of temperature in the frontier financier. He announced that, acting on legal advice, he would waive extradition. Lambert telegraphed the sheriff the news, requesting that he meet him at Glendora and relieve him of his charge.

Lambert prepared for the home-going by buying another revolver, and a pair of handcuffs for attaching his prisoner comfortably and securely to the arm of the seat. The little black bag gave him no worry. It wasn't half the trouble to watch money, when you didn't look as if you had any, as a man who had swindled people out of it and wanted to hide his face.

The police joked Lambert about the size of his bag when they gave it back to him as he was starting with his prisoner for the train.

"What have you got in that alligator, Sheriff, that you're so careful not to set it down and forget it?" the chief asked him.

"Sixteen thousand dollars," said Lambert, modestly, opening it and flashing its contents before their eyes.

CHAPTER XXV

"WHEN SHE WAKES UP"

IT WAS mid-afternoon of a bright autumn day when Lambert approached Glendora with Kerr chained to the seat beside him. As the train rapidly cut down the last few miles, Lambert noted a change in his prisoner's demeanor. Up to that time his carriage had been melancholy and morose, as that of a man who saw no gleam of hope ahead of him. He had spoken but seldom during the journey, asking no favors except that of being allowed to send a telegram to Grace from Omaha.

Lambert had granted that request readily, seeing nothing amiss in Kerr's desire to have his daughter meet him and lighten as much as she could his load of disgrace. Kerr said he wanted her to go with him to the county seat and arrange bond.

"I'll never look through the bars of a jail in my home county," he said. That was his one

burst of rebellion, his one boast, his one approach to a discussion of his serious situation, all the way.

Now as they drew almost within sight of Glendora, Kerr became fidgety and nervous. His face was strained and anxious, as if he dreaded stepping off the train into sight of the people who had known him so long as a man of consequence in that community.

Lambert began to have his own worries about this time. He regretted the kindness he had shown Kerr in permitting him to send that telegram to Grace. She might try to deliver him on bail of another kind. Kerr's nervous anxiety would seem to indicate that he expected something to happen at Glendora. It hadn't occurred to Lambert before that this might be possible. It seemed a foolish oversight.

His apprehension, as well as Kerr's evident expectation, seemed groundless as he stepped off the train almost directly in front of the waiting-room door, giving Kerr a hand down the steps. There was nobody in sight but the postmaster with the mail sack, the station agent, and the few citizens who always stood around

the station for the thrill of seeing the flier stop to take water.

Few, if any, of these recognized Kerr as Lambert hurried him across the platform and into the station, his hands manacled at his back. Kerr held back for one quick look up and down the station platform, then stumbled hastily ahead under the force of Lambert's hand. The door of the telegraph office stood open; Lambert pushed his prisoner within and closed it.

The station agent came in as the train pulled away, and Lambert made inquiry of him concerning the sheriff. The agent had not seen him there that day. He turned away with sullen countenance, looking with disfavor on this intrusion upon his sacred precincts. He stood in front of his chattering instruments in the bow window, looking up and down the platform with anxious face out of which his natural human color had gone, leaving even his lips white.

"You don't have to keep him in here, I guess, do you?" he said, still sweeping the platform up and down with his uneasy eyes.

"No. I just stepped in to ask you to put this satchel in your safe and keep it for me a while."

Lambert's calm and confident manner seemed to assure the agent, and mollify him, and repair his injured dignity. He beckoned with a jerk of his head, not for one moment quitting his leaning, watchful pose, or taking his eyes from their watch on the platform. Lambert crossed the little room in two strides and looked out. Not seeing anything more alarming than a knot of townsmen around the postmaster, who stood with the lean mail sack across his shoulder, talking excitedly, he inquired what was up.

"They're layin' for you out there," the agent whispered.

"I kind of expected they would be," Lambert told him.

"They're liable to cut loose any minute," said the agent, "and I tell you, Duke, I've got a wife and children dependin' on me!"

"I'll take him outside. I didn't intend to stay here only a minute. Here, lock this up. It belongs to Vesta Philbrook. If I have to go with the sheriff, or anything, send her word it's here."

As Lambert appeared in the door with his prisoner the little bunch of excited gossips scat-

tered hurriedly. He stood near the door a little while, considering the situation. The station agent was not to blame for his desire to preserve his valuable services for the railroad and his family; Lambert had no wish to shelter himself and retain his hold on the prisoner at the trembling fellow's peril.

It was unaccountable that the sheriff was not there to relieve him of this responsibility; he must have received the telegram two days ago. Pending his arrival, or, if not his arrival, the coming of the local train that would carry himself and prisoner to the county seat, Lambert cast about him for some means of securing his man in such manner that he could watch him and defend against any attempted rescue without being hampered.

A telegraph pole stood beside the platform some sixty or seventy feet from the depot, the wires slanting down from it into the building's gable end. To this Lambert marched his prisoner, the eyes of the town on him. He freed one of Kerr's hands, passed his arms round the pole so he stood embracing it, and locked him there.

It was a pole of only medium thickness, allowing Kerr ample room to encircle it with his chained arms, even to sit on the edge of the platform when he should weary of his standing embrace. Lambert stood back a pace and looked at him, thus ignominiously anchored in public view.

"Let 'em come and take you," he said.

He laid out a little beat up and down the platform at Kerr's back, rolled a cigarette, settled down to wait for the sheriff, the train, the rush of Kerr's friends, or whatever the day might have in store.

Slowly, thoughtfully, he paced that beat of a rod behind his surly prisoner's back, watching the town, watching the road leading into it. People stood in the doors, but none approached him to make inquiry, no voice was lifted in pitch that reached him where he stood. If anybody else in town besides the agent knew of the contemplated rescue, he kept it selfishly to himself.

Lambert did not see any of Kerr's men about. Five horses were hitched in front of the saloon; now and then he could see the top of a hat above the latticed half-door, but nobody entered, no-

body left. The station agent still stood in his window, working the telegraph key as if reporting the clearing of the flier, watching anxiously up and down the platform.

Lambert hoped that Sim Hargus and young Tom, and the old stub-footed scoundrel who was the meanest of them all who had lashed him into the fire that night, would swing the doors of the saloon and come out with a declaration of their intentions. He knew that some of them, if not all, were there. He had tied Kerr out before their eyes like wolf bait. Let them come and get him if they were men.

This seemed the opportunity which he had been waiting for time to bring him. If they flashed a gun on him now he could clean them down to the ground with all legal justification, no questions asked.

Two appeared far down the road, riding for Glendora in a swinging gallop. The sheriff, Lambert thought; missed the train, and had ridden the forty and more miles across. No; one was Grace Kerr. Even at a quarter of a mile he never could mistake her again. The other was Sim Hargus. They had miscalculated in their

intention of meeting the train, and were coming in a panic of anxiety.

They dismounted at the hotel, and started across. Lambert stood near his prisoner, waiting. Kerr had been sitting on the edge of the platform. Now he got up, moving around the pole to show them that he was not to be counted on to take a hand in whatever they expected to start.

Lambert moved a little nearer his prisoner, where he stood waiting. He had not shaved during the two days between Chicago and Glendora; the dust of the road was on his face. His hat was tipped forward to shelter his eyes against the afternoon glare, the leather thong at the back rumpling his close-cut hair. He stood lean and long-limbed, easy and indifferent in his pose, as it would seem to look at him as one might glance in passing, the smoke of his cigarette rising straight from its fresh-let tip in the calm air of the somnolent day.

As Hargus and Grace advanced, coming in the haste and heat of indignation that Kerr's humiliating situation inflamed, two men left the saloon. They stopped at the hitching-rack

as if debating whether to take their horses, and so stood, watching the progress of the two who were cutting the long diagonal across the road. When Grace, who came a little ahead of her companion in her eagerness, was within thirty feet of him, Lambert lifted his hand in forbidding signal.

"Stop there," he said.

She halted, her face flaming with fury. Hargus stopped beside her, his arm crooked to bring his hand up to his belt, sawing back and forth as if in indecision between drawing his gun and waiting for the wordy preliminaries to pass. Kerr stood embracing the pole in a pose of ridiculous supplication, the bright chain of the new handcuffs glistening in the sun.

"I want to talk to my father," said Grace, lashing Lambert with a look of scornful hate.

"Say it from there," Lambert returned, inflexible, cool; watching every movement of Sim Hargus' sawing arm.

"You've got no right to chain him up like a dog!" she said.

"You ain't got no authority, that anybody ever heard of, to arrest him in the first place,"

Hargus added, his swinging, indecisive arm for a moment still.

Lambert made no reply. He seemed to be looking over their heads, back along the road they had come, from the lift of his chin and the set of his close-gathered brows. He seemed carelessly indifferent to Hargus' legal opinion and presence, a little fresh plume of smoke going up from his cigarette as if he breathed into it gently.

Grace started forward with impatient exclamation, tossing her head in disdainful defiance of this fence-rider's authority.

"Go back!" Kerr commanded, his voice hoarse with the fear of something that she, in her unreasoning anger, had not seen behind the calm front of the man she faced.

She stopped, turning back again to where Hargus waited. Along the street men were drawing away from their doors, in cautious curiosity, silent suspense. Women put their heads out for a moment, plucked curtains aside for one swift survey, vanished behind the safety of walls. At the hitching-rack the two men — one of them Tom Hargus, the other unknown —

stood beside their horses, as if in position according to a previous plan.

" We want that man," said Hargus, his hand hovering over his gun.

" Come and take him," Lambert invited.

Hargus spoke in a low voice to Grace; she turned and ran toward her horse. The two at the hitching-rack swung into their saddles as Hargus, watching Grace over his shoulder as she sped away, began to back off, his hand stealing to his gun as if moved by some slow, precise machinery which was set to time it according to the fleeing girl's speed.

Lambert stood without shifting a foot, his nostrils dilating in the slow, deep breath that he drew. Yard by yard Hargus drew away, his intention not quite clear, as if he watched his chance to break away like a prisoner. Grace was in front of the hotel door when he snapped his revolver from its sheath.

Lambert had been waiting this. He fired before Hargus touched the trigger, his elbow to his side as he had seen Jim Wilder shoot on the day when tragedy first came into his life. Hargus spun on his heel as if he had been roped,

spread his arms, his gun falling from his hand; pitched to his face, lay still. The two on horses galloped out and opened fire.

Lambert shifted to keep them guessing, but kept away from the pole where Kerr was chained, behind which he might have found shelter. They had separated to flank him, Tom Hargus over near the corner of the depot, the other ranging down toward the hotel, not more than fifty yards between Lambert and either of them.

Intent on drawing Tom Hargus from the shelter of the depot, Lambert ran along the platform, stopping well beyond Kerr. Until that moment he had not returned their fire. Now he opened on Tom Hargus, bringing his horse down at the third shot, swung about and emptied his first gun ineffectually at the other man.

This fellow charged down on him as Lambert drew his other gun, Tom Hargus, free of his fallen horse, shooting from the shelter of the rain barrel at the corner of the depot. Lambert felt something strike his left arm, with no more apparent force, no more pain, than the flip of a

branch when one rides through the woods. But it swung useless at his side.

Through the smoke of his own gun, and the dust raised by the man on horseback, Lambert had a flash of Grace Kerr riding across the middle background between him and the saloon. He had no thought of her intention. It was not a moment for speculation with the bullets hitting his hat.

The man on horseback had come within ten yards of him. Lambert could see his teeth as he drew back his lips when he fired. Lambert centered his attention on this stranger, dark, meager-faced, marked by the unmistakable Mexican taint. His hat flew off at Lambert's first shot as if it had been jerked by a string; at his second, the fellow threw himself back in the saddle with a jerk. He fell limply over the high cantle and lay thus a moment, his frantic horse running wildly away. Lambert saw him tumble into the road as a man came spurring past the hotel, slinging his gun as he rode.

Nearer approach identified the belated sheriff. He shouted a warning to Lambert as he jerked his gun down and fired. Tom Hargus

rose from behind the rain barrel, staggered into the road, going like a drunken man, his hat in one hand, the other pressed to his side, his head hanging, his long black hair falling over his bloody face.

In a second Lambert saw this, and the shouting, shooting officer bearing down toward him. He had the peculiar impression that the sheriff was submerged in water, enlarging grotesquely as he approached. The slap of another bullet on his back, and he turned to see Grace Kerr firing at him with only the width of the platform between them.

It was all smoke, dust, confusion around him, a sickness in his body, a dimness in his mind, but he was conscious of her horse rearing, lifting its feet high — one of them a white-stockinged foot, as he marked with painful precision — and falling backward in a clatter of shod hoofs on the railroad.

When it cleared a little, Lambert found the sheriff was on the ground beside him, supporting him with his arm, looking into his face with concern almost comical, speaking in anxious inquiry.

"Lay down over there on the platform, Duke, you're shot all to pieces," he said.

Lambert sat on the edge of the platform, and the world receded. When he felt himself sweep back to consciousness there were people about him, and he was stretched on his back, a feeling in his nostrils as if he breathed fire. Somebody was lying across from him a little way; he struggled with painful effort to lift himself and see.

It was Grace Kerr. Her face was white in the midst of her dark hair, and she was dead.

It was not right for her to be lying there, with dead face to the sky, he thought. They should do something, they should carry her away from the stare of curious, shocked eyes, they should — He felt in the pocket of his vest and found the little handkerchief, and crept painfully across to her, heedless of the sheriff's protest, defiant of his restraining, kindly hand.

With his numb left arm trailing by his side, a burning pain in his breast, as if a hot rod had been driven through him, the track of her treacherous bullet, he knew, he fumbled to unfold the bit of soft white linen, refusing the

help of many sympathetic hands that were outstretched.

When he had it right, he spread it over her face, white again as an evening primrose, as he once had seen it through the dusk of another night. But out of this night that she had entered she would ride no more. There was a thought in his heart as tender as his deed as he thus masked her face from the white stare of day:

"She can wipe her eyes on it when she wakes up and repents."

CHAPTER XXVI

OYSTERS AND AMBITIONS

"IF YOU'D come on and go to Wyoming with me, Duke, I think it'd be better for you than California. That low country ain't good for a feller with a tender place in his lights."

"Oh, I think I'm all right and as good as ever now, Taterleg."

"Yes, it looks all right to you, but if you git dampness on that lung you'll take the consumption and die. I knew a feller once that got shot that way through the lights in a fight down on the Cimarron. Him and another feller fell out over ——"

"Have you heard from Nettie lately?" Lambert broke in, not caring to hear the story of the man who was shot on the Cimarron, or his subsequent miscalculations on the state of his lights.

Taterleg rolled his eyes to look at him, not

turning his head, reproach in the glance, mild reproof. But he let it pass in his good-natured way, brightening to the subject nearest his heart.

"Four or five days ago."

"All right, is she?"

"Up and a-comin', fine as a fiddle."

"You'll be holdin' hands with her before the preacher in a little while now."

"Inside of a week, Duke. My troubles is nearly all over."

"I don't know about that, but I hope it'll turn out that way."

They were on their way home from delivering the calves and the clean-up of the herd to Pat Sullivan, some weeks after Lambert's fight at Glendora. Lambert still showed the effects of his long confinement and drain of his wounds in the paleness of his face. But he sat his saddle as straight as ever, not much thinner, as far as the eye could weigh him, nothing missing from him but the brown of his skin and the blood they had drawn from him that day.

There was frost on the grass that morning, a foretaste of winter in the sharp wind. The

sky was gray with the threat of snow, the somber season of hardship on the range was at hand. Lambert thought, as he read these signs, that it would be a hard winter on livestock in that unsheltered country, and was comfortable in mind over the profitable outcome of his dealings for his employer.

As for himself, his great plans were at an end on the Bad Lands range. The fight at Glendora had changed all that. The doctor had warned him that he must not attempt another winter in the saddle with that tender spot in his lung, his blood thinned down that way, his flesh soft from being housebound for nearly six weeks. He advised a milder climate for several months of recuperation, and was very grave in his advice.

So the sheep scheme was put aside. The cattle being sold, there was nothing about the ranch that old Ananias could not do, and Lambert had planned to turn his face again toward the West. He could not lie around there in the bunkhouse and grow strong at Vesta's expense, although that was what she expected him to do.

He had said nothing to her of his determi-

nation to go, for he had wavered in it from day to day, finding it hard to tear himself away from that bleak land that he had come to love, as he never had loved the country which claimed him by birth. He had been called on in this place to fight for a man's station in it; he had trampled a refuge of safety for the defenseless among its thorns.

Vesta had said nothing further of her own plans, but they took it for granted that she would be leaving, now that the last of the cattle were sold. Ananias had told them that she was putting things away in the house, getting ready to close most of it up.

"I don't blame you for leavin'," said Taterleg, returning to the original thread of discussion, "it'll be as lonesome as sin up there at the ranch with Vesta gone away. When she's there she fills that place up like the music of a band."

"She sure does, Taterleg."

"Old Ananias'll have a soft time of it, eatin' chicken and rabbit all winter, nothing to do but milk them couple of cows, no boss to keep her eye on him in a thousand miles."

"He's one that'll never want to leave."

"Well, it's a good place for a man," Taterleg sighed, "if he ain't got nothin' else to look ahead to. I kind o' hate to leave myself, but at my age, you know, Duke, a man's got to begin to think of marryin' and settlin' down and fixin' him up a home, as I've said before."

"Many a time before, old feller, so many times I've got it down by heart."

Taterleg looked at him again with that queer turning of the eyes, which he could accomplish with the facility of a fish, and rode on in silence a little way after chiding him in that manner.

"Well, it won't do you no harm," he said.

"No," sighed the Duke, "not a bit of harm."

Taterleg chuckled as he rode along, hummed a tune, laughed again in his dry, clicking way, deep down in his throat.

"I met Alta the other day when I was down in Glendora," he said.

"Did you make up?"

"Make up! That girl looks to me like a tin cup by the side of a silver shavin' mug now,

Duke. Compare that girl to Nettie, and she wouldn't take the leather medal. She says: 'Good morning, Mr. Wilson,' she says, and I turned my head quick, like I was lookin' around for him, and never kep' a-lettin' on like I knew she meant me."

"That was kind of rough treatment for a lady, Taterleg."

"It would be for a lady, but for that girl it ain't. It's what's comin' to her, and what I'll hand her ag'in, if she ever's got the gall to speak to me."

The Duke had no further comment on Taterleg's rules of conduct. They went along in silence a little way, but that was a state that Taterleg could not long endure.

"Well, I'll soon be in the oyster parlor up to the bellyband," he said, full of the cheer of his prospect. "Nettie's got the place picked out and nailed down — I sent her the money to pay the rent. I'll be handin' out stews with a slice of pickle on the side of the dish before another week goes by, Duke."

"What are you goin' to make oysters out of in Wyoming?" the Duke inquired wonderingly.

"Make 'em out of? Oysters, of course. What do you reckon?"

"There never was an oyster within a thousand miles of Wyoming, Taterleg. They wouldn't keep to ship that far, much less till you'd used 'em up."

"Cove oysters, Duke, cove oysters," corrected Taterleg gently. "You couldn't hire a cowman to eat any other kind, you couldn't put one of them slick fresh fellers down him with a pair of tongs."

"Well, I guess you know, old feller."

Taterleg fell into a reverie, from which he started presently with a vehement exclamation of profanity.

"If she's got bangs, I'll make her cut 'em off!" he said.

"Who cut 'em off?" Lambert asked, viewing this outburst of feeling in surprise.

"Nettie! I don't want no bangs around me to remind me of that snipe-legged Alta Wood. Bangs may be all right for fellers with music boxes in their watches, but they don't go with me no more."

"I didn't see Jedlick around the ranch up

there; what do you suppose become of him? ''

'' Well, from what the boys told me, if he's still a-goin' like he was when they seen him last, he must be up around Medicine Hat by now.''

'' It was a sin the way you threw a scare into that man, Taterleg.''

'' I'm sorry I didn't lay him out on a board, dern him! ''

'' Yes, but you might as well let him have Alta.''

'' He can come back and take her any time he wants her, Duke.''

The Duke seemed to reflect this simple exposition of Jedlick's present case.

'' Yes, I guess that's so,'' he said.

For a mile or more there was no sound but the even swing of their horses' hoofs as they beat in the long, easy gallop which they could hold for a day without a break. Then Lambert:

'' Plannin' to leave tonight, are you Taterleg? ''

''All set for leavin', Duke.''

On again, the frost-powdered grass brittle under the horses' feet.

'' I think I'll pull out tonight, too.''

"Why, I thought you was goin' to stay till Vesta left, Duke?"

"Changed my mind."

"Don't you reckon Vesta she'll be a little put out if you leave the ranch after she'd figgered on you to stay and pick up and gain and be stout and hearty to go in the sheep business next spring?"

"I hope not."

"Yeh, but I bet she will. Do you reckon she'll ever come back to the ranch any more when she goes away?"

"What?" said Lambert, starting as if he had been asleep.

"Vesta; do you reckon she'll ever come back any more?"

"Well," slowly, thoughtfully, "there's no tellin', Taterleg."

"She's got a stockin' full of money now, and nobody dependin' on her. She's just as likely as not to marry some lawyer or some other shark that's after her dough."

"Yes, she may."

"No, I don't reckon much she'll ever come back. She ain't got nothing to look back to here

but hard times and shootin' scrapes — nobody to 'sociate with and wear low-neckid dresses like women with money want to."

"Not much chance for it here — you're right."

"You'd 'a' had it nice and quiet there with them sheep if you'd 'a' been able to go pardners with Vesta like you planned, old Nick Hargus in the pen and the rest of them fellers cleaned out."

"Yes, I guess there'll be peace around the ranch for some time to come."

"Well, you made the peace around there, Duke; if it hadn't 'a' been for you they'd 'a' broke Vesta up and run her out by now."

"You had as much to do with bringin' them to time as I did, Taterleg."

"Me? Look me over, Duke; feel of my hide. Do you see any knife scars in me, or feel any bullet holes anywhere? I never done nothing but ride along that fence, hopin' for a somebody to start something. They never done it."

"They knew you too well, old feller."

"Knowed *me!*" said Taterleg. "Huh!"

On again in quiet, Glendora in sight when

they topped a hill. Taterleg seemed to be thinking deeply; his face was sentimentally serious.

"Purty girl," he said in a pleasant vein of musing.

"Which one?"

"Vesta. I like 'em with a little more of a figger, a little thicker in some places and wider in others, but she's trim and she's tasty, and her heart's pure gold."

"You're right it is, Taterleg," Lambert agreed, keeping his eyes straight ahead as they rode on.

"You're aimin' to come back in the spring and go pardners with her on the sheep deal, ain't you, Duke?"

"I don't expect I'll ever come back, Taterleg."

"Well," said Taterleg abstractedly, "I don't know."

They rode past the station, the bullet-scarred rain barrel behind which Tom Hargus took shelter in the great battle still standing in its place, and past the saloon, the hitching-rack empty before it, for this was the round-up season — nobody was in town.

"There's that slab-sided, spider-legged Alta Wood standin' out on the porch," said Taterleg disgustedly, falling behind Lambert, reining around on the other side to put him between the lady and himself.

"You'd better stop and bid her good-bye," Lambert suggested.

Taterleg pulled his hat over his eyes to shut out the sight of her, turned his head, ignoring her greeting. When they were safely past he cast a cautious look behind.

"I guess that settled *her* hash!" he said. "Yes, and I'd like to wad a handful of chewin' gum in them old bangs before I leave this man's town!"

"You've broken her chance for a happy married life with Jedlick, Taterleg. Your heart's as hard as a bone."

"The worst luck I can wish her is that Jedlick'll come back," he said, turning to look at her as he spoke. Alta waved her hand.

"She's a forgivin' little soul, anyway," Lambert said.

"Forgivin'! 'Don't hurt him, Mr. Jedlick,' she says, 'don't hurt him!' Huh! I had to

build a fire under that old gun of mine to melt the chawin' wax off of her. I wouldn't give that girl a job washin' dishes in the oyster parlor if she was to travel from here to Wyoming on her knees."

So they arrived at the ranch from their last expedition together. Lambert gave Taterleg his horse to take to the barn, while he stopped in to deliver Pat Sullivan's check to Vesta and straighten up the final business, and tell her good-bye.

CHAPTER XXVII

EMOLUMENTS AND REWARDS

LAMBERT took off his hat at the door and smoothed his hair with his palm, tightened up his necktie, looked himself over from chest to toes. He drew a deep breath then, like a man fortifying himself for a trial that called for the best that was in him to come forward. He knocked on the door.

He was wearing a brown duck coat with a sheepskin collar, the wool of which had been dyed a mottled saffron, and corduroy breeches as roomy of leg as Taterleg's state pair. These were laced within the tall boots which he had bought in Chicago, and in which he took a singular pride on account of their novelty on the range.

It was not a very handsome outfit, but there was a rugged picturesqueness in it that the pistol belt and chafed scabbard enhanced, and he carried it like a man who was not ashamed

of it, and graced it by the worth that it contained.

The Duke's hair had grown long; shears had not touched his head since his fight with Kerr's men. Jim Wilder's old scar was blue on his thin cheek that day, for the wind had been cold to face. He was so solemn and severe as he stood waiting at the door that it would seem to be a triumph to make him smile.

Vesta came to the door herself, with such promptness that seemed to tell she must have been near it from the moment his foot fell on the porch.

"I've come to settle up with you on our last deal, Vesta," he said.

She took him to the room in which they always transacted business, which was a library in fact as well as name. It had been Philbrook's office in his day. Lambert once had expressed his admiration for the room, a long and narrow chamber with antlers on the walls above the bookcases, a broad fireplace flanked by leaded casement windows. It was furnished with deep leather chairs and a great, dark oak table, which looked as if it had stood in some English manor

in the days of other kings. The windows looked out upon the river.

A pleasant place on a winter night, Lambert thought, with a log fire on the dogs, somebody sitting near enough that one could reach out and find her hand without turning his eyes from the book, the last warm touch to crown the comfort of his happy hour.

"You mean our latest deal, not our last, I hope, Duke," she said, sitting at the table, with him at the head of it like a baron returned to his fireside after a foray in the field.

"I'm afraid it will be our last; there's nothing left to sell but the fence."

She glanced at him with relief in her eyes, a quick smile coming happily to her lips. He was busy with the account of calves and grown stock which he had drawn from his wallet, the check lying by his hand. His face taken as an index to it, there was not much lightness in his heart. Soon he had acquitted himself of his stewardship and given the check into her hand. Then he rose to leave her. For a moment he stood silent, as if turning his thoughts.

"I'm going away," he said, looking out of

the window down upon the tops of the naked cottonwoods along the river.

Just around the corner of the table she was standing, half facing him, looking at him with what seemed almost compassionate tenderness, so sympathetic were her eyes. She touched his hand where it lay with fingers on his hat-brim.

"Is it so hard for you to forget her, Duke?"

He looked at her frankly, no deceit in his eyes, but a mild surprise to hear her chide him so.

"If I could forget of her what no forgiving soul should remember, I'd feel more like a man," he said.

"I thought — I thought —" she stammered, bending her head, her voice soft and low, "you were grieving for her, Duke. Forgive me."

"Taterleg is leaving tonight," he said, overlooking her soft appeal. "I thought I'd go at the same time."

"It will be so lonesome here on the ranch without you, Duke — lonesome as it never was lonesome before."

"Even if there was anything I could do around the ranch any longer, with the cattle all gone and nobody left to cut the fence, I wouldn't

be any use, dodging in for every blizzard that came along, as the doctor says I must."

"I've come to depend on you as I never depended on anybody in my life."

"And I couldn't do that, you know, any more than I'd be content to lie around doing nothing."

"You've been square with me on everything, from the biggest to the least. I never knew before what it was to lie down in security and get up in peace. You've fought and suffered for me here in a measure far in excess of anything that common loyalty demanded of you, and I've given you nothing in return. It will be like losing my right hand, Duke, to see you go."

"Taterleg's going to Wyoming to marry a girl he used to know back in Kansas. We can travel together part of the way."

"If it hadn't been for you they'd have robbed me of everything by now — killed me, maybe — for I couldn't have fought them alone, and there was no other help."

"I thought maybe in California an old half-invalid might pick up and get some blood put into him again."

"You came out of the desert, as if God sent you, when my load was heavier than I could bear. It will be like losing my right eye, Duke, to see you go."

"A man that's a fool for only a little while, even, is bound to leave false impressions and misunderstandings of himself, no matter how wide his own eyes have been opened, or how long. So I've resigned my job on the ranch here with you, Vesta, and I'm going away."

"There's no misunderstanding, Duke — it's all clear to me now. When I look in your eyes and hear you speak I know you better than you know yourself. It will be like losing the whole world to have you go!"

"A man couldn't sit around and eat out of a woman's hand in idleness and ever respect himself any more. My work's finished ——"

"All I've got is yours — you saved it to me, you brought it home."

"The world expects a man that hasn't got anything to go out and make it before he turns around and looks — before he lets his tongue betray his heart and maybe be misunderstood by those he holds most dear."

"It's none of the world's business — there isn't any world but ours!"

"I thought with you gone away, Vesta, and the house dark nights, and me not hearing you around any more, it would be so lonesome and bleak here for an old half-invalid ——"

"I wasn't going, I couldn't have been driven away! I'd have stayed as long as you stayed, till you found — till you knew! Oh, it will tear — tear — my heart — my heart out of — my breast — to see you go!"

Taterleg was singing his old-time steamboat song when Lambert went down to the bunk-house an hour before sunset. There was an aroma of coffee mingling with the strain:

Oh, I bet my money on a bob-tailed hoss,
An' a hoo-dah, an' a hoo-dah;
I bet my money on a bob-tailed hoss,
An' a hoo-dah bet on the bay.

Lambert smiled, standing beside the door until Taterleg had finished. Taterleg came out with his few possessions in a bran sack, giving Lambert a questioning look up and down.

"It took you a long time to settle up," he said.

"Yes. There was considerable to dispose of and settle," Lambert replied.

"Well, we'll have to be hittin' the breeze for the depot in a little while. Are you ready?"

"No. Changed my mind; I'm going to stay."

"Goin' in pardners with Vesta?"

"Pardners."

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